

CHAMPION OF THE MAIN

Capt. W. E. Johns



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*The Air Adventures of
Major James Bigglesworth*

BIGGLES HITS THE TRAIL
BIGGLES FLIES EAST
BIGGLES & CO.
BIGGLES IN AFRICA
BIGGLES AIR COMMODORE
BIGGLES FLIES WEST
BIGGLES GOES TO WAR
BIGGLES FLIES SOUTH
BIGGLES IN SPAIN
BIGGLES FLIES NORTH
BIGGLES SECRET AGENT
BIGGLES IN THE BALTIC
BIGGLES IN THE SOUTH SEAS
BIGGLES CHARTER PILOT
BIGGLES SEES IT THROUGH
BIGGLES IN BORNEO
BIGGLES IN THE JUNGLE
BIGGLES DEFIES THE SWASTIKA
SPITFIRE PARADE
THE RESCUE FLIGHT

CHAMPION
OF THE MAIN

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

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[Illustrations are not in the public domain]

Mark and the Captain before the Council
‘Are you deaf, fellow?’ he said coldly
Mark sees his father
Rochelle makes an end
‘I trust you find my ship to your liking’
‘Arrest those men’.

TYPES OF SHIPS

MENTIONED IN THIS BOOK

TALL SHIP. An expression used to denote an English-built ship of a type which usually had a short hull and tall masts. The Spanish ships had large hulls and small spars.

YAWL. A small ship's boat.

SCHOONER. A two- or three-masted vessel, partly square, partly fore-and-aft rigged.

SNOW. A large type of two-master, square-rigged.

SLOOP. This term covered several sorts of vessels. Frequently a one-masted vessel, fore-and-aft rigged, with gaff mainsail and jib.

BRIGANTINE. A two-masted merchantman, square-rigged on the foremast, and fore-and-aft rigged on the mainmast.

GALLEON. A large vessel with three or even four decks. This type of ship was used chiefly by the Spaniards for their trade with the West Indies.

BARQUE. Three-masted vessel, square rigged on fore- and mainmasts, fore-and-aft rigged on mizzen.

FRIGATE. Early type of fast-sailing man-of-war, more lightly armed than the line-of-battle ship.

CAPTAIN CHAMPION COMES ASHORE

CAPTAIN CHAMPION COMES ASHORE

IN the year of our Lord 1687 the island of Jamaica, 'isle of woods and waters', queen of the Caribbean Sea, had not changed over much since that bright October day, nearly two hundred years before, when Messer Christopher Columbus, in his little square-rigged *Santa Maria*, had come sailing over the eastern horizon in search of the Indies. Here and there a splash of vivid green marked the sugar plantation of a settler, and on the long curving spit of sand beside the harbour, called the Palisadoes, clustered the houses of the thriving little town of Port Royal, the centre of the island's activity; as well it might be, for along its narrow, tortuous streets rum ran like water, and pieces of eight, the loot of a thousand raids and piracies, were tossed about like ha'pence.

Port Royal, despite its regal name, was, in fact, a sink of vice and iniquity the like of which had never been seen before, nor has been seen since. For here came pirates and buccaneers to barter their plunder with so-called merchants who were as bad as, if not worse than, the pirates themselves, and administrative officers of the Crown who were little better—since the gleam of doubloons could all-too-often lure them from the path of duty. True, things were not quite so bad as they had been, for had not Sir Henry Morgan, the greatest buccaneer of all, won the king's gratitude by hanging most of his old accomplices out of hand? Morgan's day had passed, although he still lived on the island, a rum-besotted brawler, out of favour, fast dying of consumption, his power shorn from him by the factors of the Royal African Company, who drove a ghastly if profitable trade in human merchandise—the importation of slaves from Africa.

It was a perfect day, even for a climate where the weather is always near perfection. Overhead, the azure sky was broken only to the eastward, where a gleaming cloud of silver-white, fanned by a gentle breeze, sailed majestically towards Hispaniola. Around the bay clustered palms, their long, graceful boles reaching upward to an incredible height before breaking into a crest of emerald fronds. One had half fallen, and hung far out over the harbour, its trailing leaves ruffling the water, pure cobalt in the shallows, toning swiftly to ultramarine in the deeper parts.

From the cool veranda of a well-built house, set on the side of a hill beyond the town, Mark Lawson regarded with brooding eyes the craft riding in the anchorage, tall ships, frigates, sloops and others, with his father's

stately schooner, the *Rose of England*, just dropping anchor a cable's length from the beach. His face clouded over as he gazed on her, for the joy of the day found no response in his heart.

Mark had reason to look serious, for he had known more than his share of pain in his fifteen years of life. First had come the parting from the old family home in East Anglia, when his father, Colonel Lawson, had been falsely accused of being sympathetic to the Monmouth cause. The Colonel, burning with the injustice of the charge, had sold his goods and chattels, and taking his only son, Mark, with him, had started life anew as a planter in Jamaica. As soon as a home was ready he had sent for his wife, Mark's mother, but the ship on which she had sailed had been sunk with all hands by the notorious pirate, Gabriel Rochelle, self-styled the Count, but known to honest sailors as the Butcher.

Grief had broken the Colonel's heart. Finding it impossible to settle down, he had invested all his money in ships, one of which he commanded himself, sometimes taking Mark on short voyages, but more often leaving him at home in the care of Pierro, a negro slave. Mark, in his heart, suspected the real reason why his father so often went to sea; he thought it was in the hope that he might encounter the pirate who had killed his wife. Otherwise, why were his ships so heavily gunned?

On the present occasion he had been at sea longer than ever before, on his favourite schooner, the *Silver Spray*, and Mark was obsessed with a fear that he could not quell that his father would return home no more. Which was why his keen, eager face was pale with anxiety under its tan, and from time to time he clenched his sun-bronzed hands until the knuckles showed white.

From his steady grey eyes and flaxen hair, cut level at the nape (the legacy, perhaps, of a Viking ancestor), to his buckled shoes, he looked all his fifteen years. Although he was slight, his tall frame was well knit; his father had seen to that. Daily exercise and sword drill had broadened his shoulders, while life at sea had both strengthened his arms and sharpened his wits. One of his father's whims had been to make him, from earliest childhood, carry an iron bar in his right hand when he went walking, and this had so steeled his wrist that he could now hold his own at sword-play even with John Champion, who had been with his father in the army and was reckoned to be one of the finest swordsmen in it. He had resigned as a protest against the charge brought against his colonel, and had accompanied him to the new world, where he now commanded the *Rose of England*.

Mark's lonely vigil was interrupted by Pierro, an enormous negro in the prime of life, who some years before had saved him when he had fallen foul

of a party of drunken buccaneers near Port Royal. In return for this service Mark had persuaded his father to buy the plantation-born negro slave from a master whose cruelty was a byword on the island. Thereafter a curious attachment had sprung up between them, Pierro following his young master with the grateful devotion of a faithful dog. Six feet four inches he stood in his bare feet, a pillar of bone and muscle with the simple mind of a child, seemingly unaware of his mighty strength, the full power of which Mark had never yet tested.

‘Massa, he no come, sar, ha?’ he questioned, in the curious whining voice employed by most slaves, the result of years of servitude.

‘Not yet, Pierro,’ answered Mark quietly.

Pierro’s big, childlike eyes roamed over the shipping in the harbour with an expression of faint surprise. They came to rest on the *Rose*. ‘Da *Rose*, she done come back, hm?’ he drawled. ‘Mebbe Massa Champion find sometn, ha?’

Mark nodded, for the *Rose* had been out on patrol to see if she could locate the missing ship, and her long-boat was now flashing over the water towards the beach. But his father was not in it. The only passengers he recognized were John Champion and Dan Sullivan, his Irish quartermaster.

‘I think by his manner he may have news,’ Mark told Pierro. ‘Bring a jug of limejuice for the Captain, and some rum for Dan. They’re coming now.’

A few minutes later he saw them hurrying up through the waving bamboos that lined the garden path, and his muscles stiffened, for their mission was clearly urgent. Yet in spite of his anxiety, a ghost of a smile played about the corners of his mouth as he watched them, for a more ill-assorted couple would have been hard to find.

Captain Champion came from an aristocratic family, and he showed his patrician breeding in every inch of his tall, slim, soldierly figure. As an ensign he had seen his first battle at the tender age of fourteen, and twelve years of military service had made a man of him. Now, at twenty-eight, his face, figure, and thoughts were moulded in lines that would never change. By nature dark, the fierce sun of the tropics had tanned his skin to the clear, warm brown of an Indian, setting off in startling contrast a perfect set of teeth, which flashed when he smiled, as he often did, although he was not smiling now. Curls as black as a raven’s wing cascaded from under his plumed hat and rested on his square shoulders. His jaw was clean-cut and his lips firm; alert, dark eyes that could dance at a merry jest, or gleam coldly like blue ice if occasion demanded, reflected the active brain behind

them. Handsome and debonair, his natural elegance was enhanced by well-cut clothes: blue, brass-buttoned velvet coat, lace cravat at the throat, knee breeches, white stockings and silver-buckled shoes. As he strode up the path, with one hand resting on the hilt of his sword, Mark thought that he had never seen a more gallant figure of a man, and glowed with pride that he was his friend.

Very different was his companion, Daniel Sullivan, who hailed from Belfast town and took care that every one knew it. Short, and of immense width, he showed few signs of the sixty years that had passed over his head—or so he claimed—although in that time there were few seas that had not heard his soft Irish brogue and ringing laughter. His clothes were ragged and nondescript. An open shirt disclosed a throat as massive as the trunk of a tree, with its base lost in undergrowth, the undergrowth in this case being a mat of hair that sprouted from his brawny chest. On his head he wore a scarlet bandana from the sides of which, and attached to it, hung two enormous gold ear-rings, after the manner of a buccaneer, while as if to carry the pose further, he swung in his right hand a murderous-looking cutlass with which, as he walked, he slashed at the bamboos that occasionally hung across the path.

Some there were who whispered that Dan had more than once been ‘on the account’, as the pirates styled their activities, and there was little reason to doubt it; at all events, he never denied it. His face and arms—and, no doubt, his body, could it be seen—were covered with the scars of many wounds, but the most conspicuous mutilation was his ears, which, in fact, did not exist, since they had both been shorn off close to his head. How he had come by this disfigurement he had never been heard to say; once, when Mark had asked him outright, he had fingered a scar that ran diagonally across his cheek, winked a twinkling eye, and then burst into a roar of laughter, which did not, however, deceive his questioner, for there was a strain of bitterness behind it that could not be disguised.

‘Maybe one day you’ll know, me bhoy,’ he had answered, discharging a stream of brown tobacco juice at a persistent mosquito, with fatal results to the insect. ‘Sure and begorra, when I meet the brisk lad who borrowed me ears, it’s the head of him I’ll have to pay for ’em, so I will, by Saint Pathrick.’

For Dan Sullivan, ‘the sweetest quartermaster who ever trod a deck’ as his Captain declared, was no respecter of persons, as the riff-raff on the waterfront well knew; they gave him ‘gangway’ with alacrity when he demanded it.

‘What news, John?’ called Mark eagerly, as the strange pair reached the foot of the steps that led to the veranda.

The Captain did not answer at once. He ran lightly up the steps and from there stood looking at Mark, while Dan, in a sort of childish embarrassment, drew lines on the board floor with his cutlass. Something in the Captain’s eyes alarmed Mark, for he caught his breath sharply before repeating his question. ‘Out with it, John,’ he cried impatiently.

‘Sure, out with it,’ rumbled Dan. ‘The sooner bad medicine’s took, the better, as me ould mother would say,’ he added, with brutal frankness.

The Captain moistened his lips, the muscles of his face working as if he laboured under great emotion. ‘It’s bad news, Mark,’ he said at last.

Mark steeled himself for the blow. ‘Speak up,’ he said through his teeth.

‘The *Silver Spray* is lost.’

Mark started, although he was prepared for it. ‘How d’ye know?’

‘I picked up Peter Martin, one of your father’s hands, on a cay near Providence.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He is dead. He had been shot. He died in my arms.’

‘Shot!’

‘Yes.’

‘Then ’twas not a storm?’

‘No.’

‘A Spaniard?’

‘No; it was Rochelle, the Butcher.’

‘And my father?’

The Captain looked uncomfortable. ‘’Tis hard to say for certainty.’

‘I demand to know the truth.’

‘’Tis the truth I’m telling ye, lad. I know no more on that score. When the ship was taken Martin jumped the rail and dived into the sea. The pirates shot him, and he sank, pretending to be dead. He nearly was, for the ball had gone right through him. But a current carried him to shore, where he lay until I found him. Rochelle, he said, put a crew on the *Silver Spray* from his own ship, the *Merry Hammer*, and both sailed away. ’Tis no use deceiving ourselves, Mark; ye know the Butcher’s way with prisoners.’

Mark was silent for a moment, his eyes staring unseeingly through a mist of tears across the turquoise sea.

‘Did you find—bodies?’ he asked presently.

‘Ay, we found bodies—or rather, pieces of bodies, for the Butcher lives up to his name.’

‘Was my father——?’

‘Nay, he was not amongst them. We found no trace of him.’

There was another short silence.

‘How did it come about?’ asked Mark at last, in a voice that shook a little.

‘Your father was betrayed—trapped.’

Mark stared. ‘Betrayed! Trapped!’ he echoed. ‘In God’s name, how? By whom?’

‘By Menzies.’

Mark passed his hand wearily across his forehead. ‘Menzies!’ he muttered. ‘Art mad, John?’

‘Sure, and it’s mad ye’ll be when ye learn the truth,’ snarled Dan viciously, his great hands clenching and unclenching. He looked at his Captain. ‘Tell him,’ he rumbled. ‘Ach! the murthuring spalpeens,’ he breathed, reaching for the rum bottle which Pierro had just placed on the table.

‘Yes, tell me all you know,’ said Mark quietly.

‘Maybe ’tis well that ye should know,’ agreed the Captain.

HOW MARK SPOKE HIS MIND

HOW MARK SPOKE HIS MIND

THE CAPTAIN tossed his hat into a chair, loosened his sword-belt, and half-seated himself on the table, one foot resting on the floor, the other hanging clear.

‘Mark,’ he asked earnestly, ‘do you know why your father went to sea?’

‘I think so,’ answered Mark quietly.

‘Why?’

‘He sought that fiend, Butcher Rochelle.’

The Captain started. ‘Ye knew?’

‘No—I suspected. My father never told me. But there was something in his manner, in his eyes, in the way he fitted out his ships, and said good-bye to me when he went away, that told me that his enterprise was not just a trading venture.’

‘Sure, and it wasn’t hard to see at all, at all,’ announced Dan, slicing a pigtail of tobacco with a wicked-looking knife.

‘That was the way of it,’ went on the Captain, soberly. ‘And he might have succeeded had all his enemies been on the sea.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Mark quickly.

‘What I say, lad. His worst enemies were not on the blue water; they were on this island, the more dangerous since they fly no flag and show no ordnance. I’m going to tell ye something, Mark,’ went on the Captain quickly, ‘although there are some who would hang me from my own yard-arm if they heard me say it. The people who are paid to protect us are in league with Rochelle, and I have no doubt but what he pays them handsomely for the service.’

Mark said nothing, but his eyes opened wide.

‘I’ve known it this last year past,’ continued the Captain, after a swift glance round. ‘Only a blind man could fail to see how the wind blew. Why, Rochelle himself has been here——’

‘Here!’

‘Ay, here. Here in Port Royal, with his hat cock-a-hoop, cutting a dash in the taverns, and drinking wine—where do ye think?’

‘Where?’

‘In the Lieutenant-Governor’s home, when the Governor was away. How did he know the Governor was away? And, sink me, if it wasn’t a pretty party, to be sure! There was Sir Samuel Menzies, the Lieutenant-Governor himself, Jacob Lechmere, the Admiralty Judge, Spencer Huggins, the Provost-Marshal, with Rochelle and Benito Pallanca, who was then his quartermaster, but now sails his own ship in consort with him.’

‘Pah!’ Dan spat his disgust over the veranda rail.

‘Now perhaps ye see the breakers in which your father was sailing,’ continued the Captain tersely.

‘Sure, they’re as plain as a pike-staff on a dunghill, as me old father would say,’ growled Dan.

‘That explains why there is never a man-of-war in harbour when Rochelle is about,’ went on the Captain fiercely, his eyes gleaming. ‘Why Rochelle is never caught, although never a day goes by without a stout ship being scuttled and its crew slaughtered. It explains why the Lieutenant-Governor is so popular with the mountebank traders, and why the last brig in which he sent his money home was not stopped by the Butcher. Why, there’s never been a properly organized hunt for the scoundrel. Oh, yes, it tells us a lot of things. They’re all in it, the whole scurvy crew, and they are as bad as that throat-cutting miscreant Rochelle, even if they do wear the king’s uniform. That’s what’s been going on, Mark lad. Your father, a simple trusting gentleman, wouldn’t believe it, and I couldn’t make him—may God forgive me. When it was learned that he was fitting out like a king’s ship they soon saw what he’d be at. So what did they do? I’ll tell you, as Martin told me, for the Colonel told his crew as soon as they were at sea. They told him here that Rochelle was careening his ship with less than a score of men, near Providence, while the rest were hunting boucan. It was a foul lie. The ship was there, ’tis true, and Rochelle. But they were waiting with guns and muskets primed, and your father sailed into as pretty a trap as was ever laid by a parcel of scheming knaves for an honest man. Now he is out of the way, and that’s what they were after, for they were afraid of two things: first, that he might learn the truth and send word home to the king; second, that he might sweep the Butcher from the sea so that the gold that now flows like a tide into their pockets would dry up. That’s the way of it, Mark, and there’s never a man of my crew who doesn’t know it, nor, methinks, any man in Port Royal, honest sailor or buccaneer. Have ye ever seen so many brisk lads loitering at the waterside? I’ll warrant you never did. Why are they not at sea? I’ll tell ye. Because they’ve no liking to feel a blade in their throats. They know that Rochelle and his two captains, Benito Pallanca and Nicholas Archer, in their sloops, are waiting. Now you know as much as I do.’

Mark sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing, face grim. 'By heaven! The king shall hear of this,' he swore.

'That's the spirit, my cockerel,' growled Dan, 'but don't crow so loud, or, by the bones of Saint Pathrick, it's your own throat that'll be slit before Rochelle dances his last hornpipe at a rope's end—may the devil seize him.'

'My hat and sword, Pierro,' cried Mark peremptorily.

'What's in your mind?' asked the Captain shortly.

'The Council sits to-day in Court——'

'But you cannot——'

'Can I not, ha? Menzies is in the chair. He shall hear what I have to say. Then, if there's an honest man in Port Royal——'

'There isn't.'

'Then I'll speak my mind for all that.'

'Nay, calm yourself, lad. 'Tis madness.'

'What then? Am I to stand here like a cow in a pasture, doing nothing, saying nothing, while my father's ships are sunk and nothing done about it?' cried Mark passionately.

'Calm yourself, lad,' implored the Captain.

'Not I. 'Tis time the truth were told, and if there isn't a man to say it, then I must, or account myself a craven. Some sailor going back to England will repeat what I say, and maybe it will reach the ears of King James, or the Lord High Admiral.'

The quartermaster laughed deep in his throat and made his cutlass whistle in the air. 'Well chirped, my cock,' he rumbled. 'Board 'em, and let the blood fly, say I.'

'I'll ask for your opinion when I need it, Dan,' muttered the Captain with a worried frown. Then, to Mark, 'If your mind's made up, and you're set on going to the town, then I'll come with ye.'

'Sure, and so will I,' declared Dan. 'Let's see the colour of their——'

'Nay, you'll stay here, Dan,' ordered Mark. 'This isn't a boarding party. Stay here with Pierro to look after the house, or, maybe, go back to the *Rose*, and tell your lads to stand by for trouble. If any one would go ashore to be quit of it, then let him go, and be hanged to him.'

With that Mark slapped his hat on his head and set off down the path, closely followed by the Captain.

'Don't let me get you into trouble, John,' he said, as they strode along.

‘Nay, I’ll come,’ replied the Captain. ‘Mayhap ye’ll need a witness,’ he added nonchalantly, if a trifle significantly.

Down the path and along the white coral beach they marched under the blazing sun until they came to the ramshackle booths and huts that formed a large part of the town. Curious eyes followed them as they made straight for the court-house, where a session was about to commence.

The room was packed when they pushed their way in, not without some trouble, and there on the Bench were the men Mark hoped to see: Sir Samuel Menzies—acting Governor in the absence of the Governor, who had been recalled to England—his florid face moist with perspiration, his wig tipped back on his high, egg-shaped head—the more like one on account of its baldness; Jacob Lechmere, the Admiralty Judge, sallow, hawk-faced, scraggy-necked, still shaking from a bout of fever; Spencer Huggins, the Provost-Marshal, a little man with a mean, thin-lipped mouth, very full of himself and his authority. There were two or three others on the Bench, mostly planters, with some clerks, and here and there a marine to keep order, for a murder case was to be tried. Crowded around, wherever they could find room, were spectators and witnesses, a few of them sailors from ships in the harbour, but mostly scum from the water front with nothing better to do than look for free entertainment.

As Mark and the Captain pushed their way in their entrance caused a slight stir which made the Lieutenant-Governor look up, his quill poised.

‘What is this?’ he inquired haughtily; and then, seeing who was standing there, exchanged a quick glance with the judge.

‘I would ask you a question, sir,’ called Mark clearly.

The Lieutenant-Governor took a pinch of snuff and raised his lorgnette. ‘This is not the time or place for questions,’ he said condescendingly, ‘but if the matter is brief, perhaps. . . .’

Mark was conscious of a sea of expectant faces around him as he launched his bombshell.

‘For how long, sir,’ he cried in a ringing voice, ‘are honest subjects of His Majesty to be at the mercy of a foul villain like Gabriel Rochelle, without any steps whatever being taken to apprehend him?’

For a moment there was a silence in which the gentle lapping of the waves on the beach could be heard. It was followed by a quick buzz of whispering.

The Lieutenant-Governor’s mouth set in a hard line, with the corners turned down. ‘What do you imply by that ill-considered statement, young man?’ he rasped.

‘It was a question, but right well you call it a statement,’ cried Mark, who was deathly pale. ‘I learn, within the past hour, that my father’s schooner, the *Silver Spray*, has been taken and destroyed, and my father with it, by what means I am also aware. I demand——’

‘You demand! You demand, sirrah,’ broke in the Lieutenant-Governor, breathing heavily. ‘Who do you think you are to *demand*, in this court? Your tone and manner savour of impertinence.’

‘Ay, and well it might,’ flashed back Mark, who was beginning to tremble as his anger got the better of him. ‘And here, while we are on the subject, is another question. How much longer are the throats of honest sailors to be cut, that those who are paid to protect them may reap a golden harvest——?’

‘Silence!’ roared the Lieutenant-Governor, bringing his fist down with a crash.

‘Steady, lad,’ whispered the Captain at Mark’s elbow.

‘I will not be silent,’ cried Mark furiously. ‘This bribery and corruption has gone on long enough. Rochelle comes and goes as he pleases in this very town, with the blood of stout captains still wet on his hands. Why? You know why, as does every man jack in this Court. I demand——’

‘You demand, do you, you jackanapes?’ snarled the Lieutenant-Governor, white with anger.

‘Yes, I demand,’ shouted Mark, now beside himself. ‘I hope that the next ship that sails to England will carry a man who will tell the Lord High Admiral——’

‘Marines, seize that boy,’ screamed the Lieutenant-Governor above the uproar that had broken out at Mark’s last words.

A dozen marines converged on him, but Mark leapt nimbly to a window seat, where he whipped out his sword and stood at bay, eyes gleaming, nostrils quivering.

‘Thief! Liar! Rogue!’ he hurled at the Bench, looking at the members in turn. ‘First my mother and now my father, and a thousand trusting seamen, that you may line your purses with blood-stained guineas——’

‘The boy’s mad. Seize him, marines,’ choked the Lieutenant-Governor. ‘To jail with him. I’ll cool his——’

‘’Tis in jail you’d put him, is it?’ cried the Captain, springing forward and taking his place beside Mark, the point of his sword dancing in front of him. ‘The lad speaks truth, as every one in this room knows, and ’tis time the truth were told. I’ll——’

He got no farther. What exactly happened no one could say, not even the Captain, but it seemed that some of the marines at the back made a concerted rush, pushing those in front of them, one of whom stumbled and then pitched forward, right on the point of the Captain's flickering sword. He gave a choking cry and went down, coughing blood.

The Captain stared aghast, for to kill a man in the king's uniform was the last thing in his mind.

The deathly hush that had settled on the room was broken by the Lieutenant-Governor's voice, cold and venomous, although there was more than a hint of satisfaction in it. 'You shall hang for this, you dog,' he grated.

Mark would have fought to the end, but the Captain held his sword arm. 'Art crazy, Mark?' he cried fiercely. 'Kill one of them and they'll hang you, too.'

Perhaps it was the word 'too' that made Mark drop the point of his sword, for its implication was apparent. The marines took advantage of their opportunity. There was a sudden rush, and amidst a hubbub of voices, some denouncing and some applauding, the offenders were seized and dragged to the adjacent jail. There was only one cell, so they could not be separated, but they were not alone. The cell was already occupied by the man who was waiting to be tried, a sailor, judging by his striped shirt and battered chimney-pot hat. He was a young man with a brawny frame and cheerful countenance, and he broke off from a shanty he was singing to hail the newcomers vociferously.

But Mark hardly noticed him; he had no thoughts for strangers. He looked at the Captain with startled eyes, appalled by the magnitude of the disaster which had befallen him. 'Faith, John, I'm sorry,' he muttered. ' 'Twas my fault. My temper has ruined you.'

'Temper or not, the world will know the truth at last or I'm mistaken,' answered the Captain grimly. 'Sink me, but you said your piece right prettily.'

'Will they hang you, do you think?' asked Mark anxiously.

'Not a doubt of it,' returned the Captain lightly.

'But 'twas an accident. The fellow fell on your sword.'

'Methinks they'll find witnesses to tell a different tale in court,' observed the Captain bitterly.

Mark shook his head wearily. 'If they hang you then they can hang me, too,' he muttered.

‘They may do that, since you know so much,’ the Captain told him simply.

‘But I killed no one.’

The Captain laughed harshly. ‘A little omission like that won’t worry a villain of Menzies’ kidney. He’ll find a crime to fit the punishment, I’ll warrant.’

**WHAT BEFELL AT THE GALLOWS OF
PORT ROYAL**

WHAT BEFELL AT THE GALLOWS OF PORT ROYAL

THE day wore on, and the heat in the insanitary little cell became suffocating. The sailor continued to sing his shanties as though he had not a care in the world, and only sang the louder when marines came to fetch him for his trial. It did not take long. He was still singing when he was brought back, accompanied by a bibulous-looking chaplain whose cassock had not, by the look of it, seen soap or water since he came to the Indies. He was intoning prayers in a thin, high-pitched voice—or rather, it would be more correct to say that he was trying to, for it often broke, the man obviously being the worse for drink.

The sailor cut short his incantations with a sudden hail. ‘Pipe down, parson,’ he cried. ‘If a man must die then let him die cheerful, not whimpering like a dog; so up with your anchor and begone to your grog shop, for I’ll send for the likes o’ you when I need you.’

The chaplain withdrew without demur, in a manner which suggested that he did indeed prefer the bottle to the Bible.

‘So they’re going to hang you, then?’ asked Mark, looking at the sailor with a sort of morbid curiosity.

‘Ay, me lad, that’s how it goes,’ was the cheerful answer. ‘If you’ll take a look through the window you’ll see that the leafless tree is all ready for them to turn me off in the morning.’ The sailor pointed through the bars of the unglazed window towards the Palisadoes, where the gaunt framework of the gallows stood out sharply against the clear blue sky.

‘You’ve been a-pirating, mayhap?’ suggested the Captain.

‘I’ve sailed with Butcher Rochelle,’ admitted the sailor.

‘You sailed with Rochelle?’ cried Mark with a start.

‘I have, but the choice was not my own,’ declared the other. ‘’Twas my first voyage westwards, and I sailed in the *Dolphin*, but we was took by Rochelle, thanks to a captain who wouldn’t fight, for all that he had some brisk lads to back him—blister him for a coward. All he got for striking his colours before a shot was fired was a keel-hauling under his own ship, and no man ever deserved it more. When Rochelle heard that I was a smart gunner, as I could have shown him, and as I told him myself, it was fight or feed the fishes, so to keep out of the fishes’ bellies it was a pirate I had for to

be, which same choice many an honest sailorman has made before me. But I couldn't stand Rochelle's murdering ways, so, biding my time, I slipped my cable one dark night when we were careening, and here, like a fool, I came to take the king's pardon and tell what I knew about Rochelle. But 'twould seem they are not over anxious to hear anything about him, for 'twas in here they clapped me, and I'm to swing in the morning, just as an old gipsy in London town told me I should if I went off for to be a sailor. And that's the truth, as sure as me name's Will Greenaway.'

Mark glanced at the Captain, but before he could say anything a file of marines entered.

'What now?' asked the Captain.

'Ye're to stand your trial while the Court is still sitting,' replied the corporal in charge. 'Step along, and smart's the word.'

'Forsooth, but Menzies intends to lose no time,' murmured the Captain dryly.

'But this is outrageous,' cried Mark in a panic.

The Captain shrugged his shoulders. 'To be sure it is,' he answered lightly, as he turned and followed the guard.

He was gone about an hour, which time Mark sat and bore with what patience he could the songs of the condemned prisoner. He started up, though, as the bolts of the door were shot, and the Captain was pushed back into the cell.

He looked at the sailor with a whimsical smile. ' 'Tis good news for ye I have,' he said. 'Ye're to have company in the morning.'

Mark stared unbelievably. 'Are you saying they're going to hang you?' he cried aghast.

'That's what they say,' returned the Captain carelessly.

'But 'tis monstrous. This trial——'

The Captain laughed bitterly. 'Trial! There was no trial. The verdict was found before I went in. As I make it out, they're only waiting to hear for sure that your father won't be coming back before you join us on the gibbet. A sailor I know whispered in my ear that they're planning already to seize your father's house and ships.'

'They would dare to do that?'

'They would dare to do anything. Some one has started a rumour that your father has gone a-pirating—and you can guess who it was who thought of such an outrageous lie.'

Mark was speechless when he saw to what extent he had played into the hands of his father's enemies.

'But this is impossible,' he stammered at last.

The Captain shook his head sadly. 'Impossible or not, 'tis a hempen cravat I shall wear round my neck in the morning.'

Mark stood tense by the window embrasure, his hands clenched, his face pale and drawn with passion. 'The knaves,' he ground out through his teeth. 'The foul, lying villains. Oh, for one more day of freedom, with my sword in my hand, and I'd spit that jackal Menzies . . .' He broke off, choking in his impotent rage.

The sailor grinned and slapped his thigh. 'Stap me for a bumpkin, but that's the talk I like to hear,' he declared. 'With me beside you, and a good cutlass in my hand, we'd carve a lane through this parcel of mangy dogs——' He broke off, muttering to himself.

Silence fell. There seemed to be nothing to say. The afternoon wore on, and at length gave way to brief twilight. Came night, and the only sounds were the distant lap of waves on the shore and snatches of ribald singing from the drinking booths. The prisoners did not sleep, or attempt to sleep; in any case the heat would have made it difficult.

At long last the sky began to turn grey, and a little while later came the tramp of marching footsteps. The Captain laid a hand on Mark's shoulder.

'Methinks 'tis time to bid ye farewell,' he said quietly, 'Be of good courage—but I need hardly tell ye that—and if 'tis any comfort, remember they can only hang us once.'

Mark tried to speak, but the words would not come. He could only stare through the window to where a noisy crowd was beginning to form round the gibbet, with its pendant noose, now swinging gently in the morning breeze.

Will Greenaway began singing, although whether he was a brave man or a fool only he knew. Perhaps even he did not know.

The door opened and the guard entered. The chaplain was there, too, sober now but bleary-eyed. He began reading from a prayer-book in a thin reedy voice.

'Let up, man,' the Captain told him irritably. 'This is farce enough in full measure, without adding hypocrisy.'

The prisoners fell into line, and their hands were quickly tied behind their backs. The corporal touched Mark on the arm.

'How now?' asked Mark wonderingly.

‘By the Provost’s orders, you are to come and watch the hanging; maybe it’ll teach you to keep a prudent tongue in your head,’ sneered the corporal.

‘Nay, this is monstrous,’ protested the Captain.

Mark turned away from the window with a strange light gleaming in his eyes. ‘I’ll come,’ he said. ‘What I see this day will serve to remind me of what I owe certain people, lest, mayhap, I forget.’

‘March!’ barked the corporal, and the cortège began to wind its way slowly towards the scaffold, surrounded by a boisterous crowd.

Mark stared at them disdainfully, particularly when he saw several men whom his father had helped laughing and jeering with the rest. He looked about for Dan, but could not see him, so he could only suppose that he was still on the ship, probably unconscious of what was happening ashore. Just in front he could see the Captain looking about him, too, possibly for the same reason.

The procession reached the scaffold, under the cross-bar of which, immediately beneath the ropes, two barrels had been placed. Upon these, Mark knew, the prisoners would be compelled to stand while the nooses were adjusted around their necks, after which they would be kicked away by the grinning hangman. He had watched the performance many times from the distant hill-side, for hangings were as common as buccaneers in Port Royal. But before the final drama there would be a certain amount of ceremony. The Provost-Marshal would address the crowd, inviting them to observe the fruits of evil doing; then the parson would continue with prayers for the souls of the condemned until the moment came for the barrels to be kicked away.

Silence fell as the Provost-Marshal stepped forward, and in a sort of horrid nightmare Mark found himself listening to a long, pious speech that meant little to the crowd, and nothing to the prisoners who were being jostled into their places on the barrels. The nooses were adjusted to the satisfaction of the hangman, who whistled cheerfully as he performed his grim task, thinking, no doubt, of the guinea so easily earned.

‘Let us pray for the souls of these poor miscreants,’ cried the chaplain in a sort of braying voice, and a solemn hush fell upon the assembly, while a good number, following the example of the Provost-Marshal, closed their eyes.

It was at this moment that Mark first saw Dan. He was edging swiftly to the front, and at the expression on his face it was all Mark could do to restrain a cry.

The quartermaster, the loose ends of his bandana flapping in the breeze, ear-rings swinging and gleaming in the sunlight, his lips parted in a ferocious grin, leapt forward, his cutlass describing a flashing arc against the blue sky. 'Ho bhoys,' he roared, 'down with the mongrels!'

Pandemonium began on the instant as from all sides leapt sailors armed with cutlasses, knives, and hand-spikes. Not only sailors, but many others of the crowd, including the men Mark had previously noted. Women, of whom there were a fair number among the spectators, screamed. Yells and oaths were drowned in the roar of muskets and pistols.

Mark saw little of what happened on the scaffold itself, for he was knocked down and nearly trampled on in the first rush. When he scrambled to his feet and recovered his wits, it was to see Pierro towering over him, wielding a great wooden stake like a flail, while he punctuated the blows with grunts of savage satisfaction.

Mark snatched up a hand-spike that had been dropped and tried to fight his way toward the scaffold, but he was swept aside by Pierro, while above the uproar rose Dan's ringing voice: 'To the boats! To the boats!'

The crowd broke up, most of the spectators flying for their lives, and Mark found himself in the centre of a little party of sailors running towards the beach. A musket roared and a sailor fell, but the marine who had fired did not live long enough to see the effect of his shot, for his skull was cracked by Will Greenaway, who now appeared, fighting with demoniac rage, giving vent to his satisfaction in a series of blood-curdling yells.

'To the boats, me bhoys!' yelled Dan again, cleaving a way out of the crowd with the Captain by his side, and those who stood in their path scattered before the sweeping cutlass.

Wild excitement, not to say exultation, clutched at Mark's heart as he sped towards the *Rose's* boats, which he now saw were lying close inshore, their sterns towards the beach, held thus by eager oarsmen. Into the nearest boat he was tumbled by Pierro while there was a final skirmish on the sand. Then there was a rush to the boats, the Captain, Dan, and Will Greenaway being among the last to get into the *Rose's* long-boat.

'Let go, lads,' roared Dan. 'Brisk's the word.'

Mark saw the need for haste, for already a boat was dropping into the water from the man-of-war, not two cable lengths away, while soldiers and marines swarmed down the ropes to get into it.

The boats reached the schooner, and as those who were in them scrambled nimbly up the *Rose's* side, a gun in the fort near the Governor's

house boomed, and a feather of water leapt into the air, too close to be pleasant.

The Captain had now taken charge, and his voice, giving orders, could be heard above the din. By the time Mark reached his side the *Rose*'s rigging was alive with men, while open spaces between the spars became miraculously filled with fluttering canvas. Slowly the sails filled, and the schooner shook herself as she came to life.

Boom!

Mark jumped as a gun roared almost under his feet, and a great cloud of smoke bellied out over the sparkling water. Spray spurted over the man-of-war's long-boat, and it nearly turned turtle.

The Captain leapt lightly to the rail, and holding a stay in his left hand, pointed a quivering finger at the boat with the other. 'Back!' he yelled. 'Back, or by the powers, I'll give ye a dose of partridge.'^[1]

^[1] Small-sized shot.

Mark ran forward and saw that the anchor cable had been cut. The *Rose* was on the move, her bows coming round slowly towards the open sea. The sailors were cheering. Thrilling with such excitement as he had never known, he dashed back to where the Captain was standing.

'We've beaten them, John,' he cried.

'How about the man-of-war?' asked Will Greenaway, anxiously.

'She won't see the way we go,' smiled the Captain. 'There isn't a ship in the king's navy that can catch the *Rose* when she dips her bows into salt water.'

Dan joined them, his ugly face wreathed in smiles. 'Sure and begorra, 'twas a grand trick we played on them, to be sure,' he grinned, shaking his head so that his ear-rings flashed in the sunshine.

The Captain pointed at the fast-receding beach, on which, a little apart from a number of spectators, stood three unmistakable figures. They were the Lieutenant-Governor, the Admiralty Judge, and the Provost-Marshal. ' 'Tis a grand trick they'll play on you, too, Dan, if ever they lay hands on you again,' he said seriously. He turned suddenly to where Will Greenaway was watching the scene. 'Here, my man, did you say you were a gunner?' he asked.

'Aye, sir, I did so,' answered Will, running up.

‘Then get to the swivel gun and show us a sample of your marksmanship,’ invited the Captain. ‘Take care not to hit them, but it’s a guinea for you if you can put a shot within a score of paces of them.’

Will leapt to the weapon, a long, raking, small bore gun mounted aft. A minute passed. Then a match glowed, and an instant later the gun roared. Almost simultaneously a shower of sand spurted up on the beach about two yards to the right of the Government officials. Mark thought that the Judge had been hit, for he went over backwards, but a moment later he was up again, and without waiting to recover his wig, which had fallen off, he ran for his life after the other two, who were already bolting for cover.

A howl of derision arose from the ship and the Captain complimented the gunner on his shooting, tossing him the promised guinea. ‘A pretty shot, Will,’ he declared.

But the gunner spat disgustedly. ‘I was two yards out in my aim—but I’ll do better next time,’ he promised.

A few more shots were fired at the *Rose* both from the fort and the man-of-war, but the range was long, and getting longer every minute, and the balls fell harmlessly into the sea.

‘On what course shall I lay her, sir?’ asked Dan.

‘North-east,’ returned the Captain promptly.

‘Bound for where?’

‘Tortuga.’

Mark started. ‘Tortuga? Why, that’s the headquarters of the pirates,’ he cried.

The Captain nodded grimly. ‘That’s why we’re going there,’ he said quietly, and went off to attend to his duties.

**HOW THE BLACK FLAG WAS HOISTED
ON THE *ROSE***

HOW THE BLACK FLAG WAS HOISTED ON THE *ROSE*

THE man-of-war gave chase, but the gap between the two ships ever widened, so seeing that pursuit was hopeless the captain of the naval frigate gave it up, and turning about, made back for the harbour, leaving the *Rose* alone on the sparkling sea.

Mark found Pierro, and was delighted to learn from him that most of the objects of value in his father's house had been carried on board the ship during the night, after the rescue had been planned by Dan. He had not lacked for volunteers, for as soon as it was learned that the Captain had been condemned, many sailors ashore, as well as those aboard the *Rose*, had declared that they would not stand by and see him hanged by a parcel of rogues. Dan's greatest difficulty had been to restrain them from precipitate action, which might have ended in failure to achieve their object. The volunteers who had been on shore were now, of course, aboard the *Rose*, with the result that the decks were thronged with seamen far in excess of her normal crew. They numbered, in fact, fifty-eight, as the Captain counted them, when, presently, with the island a blur on the skyline, he shortened sail, and commanded Dan to muster all hands at the foot of the mainmast.

With the *Rose* only just moving on the calm face of the turquoise sea, he addressed them, standing on a coil of rope.

'First of all, my lads,' he cried, 'I must thank ye for what you have done for me this day. But for your loyalty I should now be a-swinging in the breeze at Port Royal, although I cannot but take notice that you may have done an evil thing for yourselves. We have a fine ship, but we have no port, for I make no doubt that Master Menzies will have dubbed us a pretty name by this time. He will post us as pirates; verily, methinks the law will agree with him; and, that being so, I have a mind to be one, though 'twas not of my choosing. As you know, I have always been accounted a diligent sailor, which, forsooth, I have tried to be, but if I am to choose between being a pirate with a stout ship under my feet, or an honest man swinging at a rope's end at Port Royal, then 'tis a pirate I will be. Now hearken while I say this, and think warily on my words lest you suffer hurt, as some of you may if you follow me. You brought me here, so 'tis only right and just that you should say which course you would steer. I cannot go back to Port Royal, or any other British port, for reasons which you know, and the like applies,

methinks, to those of you who made a stroke against the law this day. So for my part it seems that I must go on the account;^[2] but if there is ever a man amongst ye who would rather be set ashore in some quiet cove before further harm is done, then let him stand forward, for I will take it upon myself to set him down wherever he may wish. It shall never be said that John Champion persuaded an honest seaman to take the road to the gallows!’

^[2] ‘On the account’ was a term frequently used by pirates to cover their activities.

The Captain paused, looking round expectantly, but not a man moved. A smile crossed his face as he continued. ‘Faith! it would seem that we are all of one mind,’ he observed whimsically.

‘Ay!’ The word was a ringing cheer, without a single dissenting voice.

The Captain’s face suddenly grew grave and he held up his hand for silence. ‘So be it,’ he said. ‘Now let me finish, for if we are to be pirates then we must follow the rules of those who sail under the Jolly Roger. From this moment I am of no more account than any one of you, for you must choose your own officers. But this I must say. This ship belongs to Colonel Lawson, but if he has been slain by Butcher Rochelle, as we think, then it belongs to Master Mark, his son, who stands here before you, and I will not take it by force if he wills otherwise.’

All eyes switched to Mark, who met them unflinchingly. ‘Nay, John,’ he cried, ‘if the ship was mine, then it is now yours, for without these brisk lads of yours methinks I should never have set foot on her again, for which reason I say she no longer belongs to me, but to you and your company here assembled.’

A roaring cheer greeted this statement. When it subsided Mark continued, ‘This I would have you know, though. Pirates we may be, but I will ne’er consent to join forces with Butcher Rochelle, or his captains, who first slew my mother and then my father; but rather, should we come upon them, I shall expect every man here to follow me in an attack against them.’

‘Sink me, the boy’s right!’ roared Dan, and there was another enthusiastic yell of approval.

‘Now, my lads, choose your officers,’ cried the Captain, stepping down from his improvised platform; but he was quickly pushed back to a chorus

of ‘Captain Champion! Long live Captain Champion!’

Again the Captain held up his hand. ‘So be it,’ he said, ‘but there are one or two more things I must say before you commit yourselves, or I accept. I will only consent to be your captain upon conditions which I will now name, and these will be writ down in our articles. First, that we shall attack no ship flying the British flag unless she first attacks us, in which case we will fight to defend ourselves and no more. Second, that we shall give quarter when it is asked for, since I have no love for unnecessary bloodshed, and have no mind to be dubbed another butcher of the seas. Third, while I am captain I must command the ship; my orders must be obeyed as they have been obeyed in the past. For the rest, I am content to abide by the usual rules and articles of those who come from the sea.’^[3]

^[3] Another name for piracy. Pirate ships, when hailed, ‘Where are you from?’ replied, ‘From the sea.’

No objection was raised to any of the Captain’s conditions, so his appointment was confirmed with loud cheers.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘’tis my right to choose my own quartermaster, and I choose Daniel Sullivan, for he is a good man and true, and, methinks, he is a right knowledgeable fellow for the job.’

This sly reference to Dan’s past did not pass unnoticed, and it was to a shout of laughter that he stepped forward.

‘Sure, and ’twas always my ambition for to be a pirate,’ he declared, grinning broadly. Whereat there was more laughter.

After that, sails were set, and the Captain went below to prepare the articles in writing, as was customary, to prevent argument later on.

Briefly, these laid down the share of plunder each member of the crew was to receive according to his rank, punishments for disobedience to orders, and other items calculated to safeguard the ship’s company. Thus, the penalty for desertion was death, although any man was at liberty to ask for his share of booty at any time, and depart. For striking a comrade the offender received forty strokes on the bare back, and the same applied for smoking or carrying a naked light in the hold. For gambling or stealing, or concealing any article belonging to the common fund, the guilty one was to be marooned.^[4] Any man neglecting to keep his weapons clean and ready for instant action forfeited his share of plunder. The articles also provided for

compensation in the case of wounds involving disablement, so much for the loss of an arm or a leg, and so forth. All these items were usual in pirate ships, although they were not always adhered to.

[4] ‘Marooning’ means being set ashore on an uninhabited island, either with or without weapons and provisions. A ‘maroon’ is a person so set ashore. The word first came into use in 1572 when Sir Francis Drake, harrying the Spanish Main, found a number of Cimaroons, as the natives of Panama were called, on an island where they had been left by their Spanish captors. It is likely that the word first used was ‘cimarooned’, but was later abbreviated to ‘marooned’.

These articles having been read over to the crew, each man who was able to write signed his name to them, the signatures being arranged in the form of a circle, so that, should the document fall into official hands, no particular person could be accused of being the leader. Those who could not write had their names written for them, and beside them made their mark on the ‘round robin’, as the document was called. Captain Champion, however, signed his name boldly across the top, making answer to those who queried this that if he were captured alive he would have short shrift anyway, so it made no difference.

Thereafter the *Rose* held on her course for Tortuga, where the Captain hoped to purchase more guns and powder; for although the schooner mounted twelve guns, not counting a chaser fore and aft—an unusually large number for a trader—the Captain was not satisfied. He would, he knew, be more than a match for any ordinary merchantman, but there were other ships on the seas besides traders. It was Rochelle of whom he was thinking, as he confessed to Mark in the cabin, whither they had retired to have a few words in confidence about the new venture that had been thrust upon them.

The Captain had begun by trying to induce Mark to allow himself to be put on board a vessel bound for England before the *Rose* became publicly branded as a pirate, but Mark scouted the suggestion with indignation. The Captain pointed out to him what the dire result of capture would be, either by a man-of-war on the one hand, or Rochelle on the other, but Mark’s eyes flashed as he made reply.

‘Upon my word, John, you seem to have a poor opinion of me, after all,’ he said in a disappointed voice. ‘Do you think I should be content to stay in England, even if my relations would have me, while that half-breed hound

of Satan, Gabriel Rochelle, thrived on his ill-gotten gains? I live for the day when I shall meet him face to face, and that will be the last day on earth for one or other of us. If, by your aid, and the help of this good ship that belonged to my father, I can end his villainy once and for all, then, methinks, I shall not have lived in vain.'

The Captain shrugged his shoulders and smiled down into Mark's face. 'As you will, lad,' he said cheerfully. 'We both have good cause to wish him ill in all conscience, but it would be an evil day for me if ye suffered hurt. Let not your headlong passion lead you to the fat ewe designed for him. Perhaps we shall encounter him or one of his ships at Tortuga; if so, take my counsel and curb your tongue until the dice are ready to throw, or we may find them loaded against us to our misfortune.'

They were to meet with one of his ships sooner than they thought, but Mark did not know that as he lay presently in the foretop, watching the sun go down in a blaze that was as crimson as the blood of Rochelle's many victims.

HOW THE *ROSE* SAVED A MAN-OF-WAR

HOW THE *ROSE* SAVED A MAN-OF-WAR

IT seemed to Mark that he had only been asleep for a short time when he awoke with a start; raising himself on one elbow he listened intently, and not without alarm, to the noises that had no doubt awakened him.

From the deck above the cabin which it had been decided he should share with the Captain came a quick patter of bare feet, and excited voices, but behind these nearer sounds there was a distant one, a deep, sinister rumble.

In a moment Mark was on his feet, groping his way through a wan twilight towards the far side of the cabin.

‘John, methinks a tempest is upon us,’ he said tersely.

There was no reply, however, and his groping hands soon told him the reason. The Captain’s bunk was empty, and he realized that he must be already on deck. Swiftly he slipped into his clothes, and, buckling on his sword, he ran up the companion-way.

A glance showed him that dawn was just breaking, although the sun could not be seen, for the ship, almost becalmed, was enveloped in a filmy sea mist. He noticed that the thunder—as he took it to be—was strangely short and intermittent, causing the air to quiver furiously, like ripples over water. A knot of sailors were standing in the waist, talking, and towards them he hurried eager and expectant.

‘What’s afoot?’ he asked quickly.

‘A battle,’ answered one of them shortly.

Wondering why he had not recognized the sound of gunfire, Mark ran forward, and saw the Captain peering into the murk. Dan, cutlass in hand, stood beside him, while a short distance away another group of sailors were all staring seaward, muttering in low, excited voices.

The Captain threw Mark a swift smile as he ran up. ‘Upon my soul, methinks we have found Master Rochelle sooner than we bargained for,’ he said lightly.

‘’Tis pirates then, you think?’ asked Mark eagerly.

‘What else—unless a man-of-war has found a Spaniard?’

‘Let us pray it is Rochelle,’ cried Mark.

‘Let us rather pray that it is not,’ returned the Captain grimly.

‘Why thus?’

‘Because a schooner of a dozen guns and less than three score men is no match for a tall ship manned by close upon two hundred sea wolves,’ said the Captain calmly.

‘How do they engage in this fog?’ asked Mark.

‘Rochelle—if ’tis Rochelle—would see his victim before the fog came, mayhap, and while the one lay waiting for a wind Rochelle would man his boats and tow his own ship nearer. That, methinks, would be the way of it,’ declared the Captain. ‘Ha! Here’s the wind,’ he added quickly. ‘Now we shall see.’

Mark stood aside as the sailors dashed to their battle stations, for the drooping dew-soaked sails had filled; in a moment the mist had rolled away, so that everything was plain to see.

Two ships only were in sight; they lay about a mile away, a small frigate and a barque with a dark painted hull. The two were not a cable’s length apart, and slowly drawing nearer to each other. Above them hung a mighty cloud of smoke.

Mark saw that the deck of the barque, which was the nearer of the two, was alive with men, all on the side nearest to the frigate, crowding on the bulwarks and hanging in the rigging. On the other hand, the frigate, which was clearly getting the worst of the encounter, seemed to be deserted, although the occasional flash of a gun showed that this was not the case.

A movement carried Mark’s eyes upward, and he held his breath for a moment as he saw something he had never seen before, but recognized at once. It was a large black flag, decorated with a red device, flapping at the peak of the barque. It was the Jolly Roger, the grim emblem of piracy.

He was still staring at it as if fascinated when Dan slapped him on the back. ‘’Tis Nick Archer,’ he hissed, with an expression on his face that Mark had never seen there before. ‘’Tis Nick himself, the Butcher’s bosom companion, so it is, in his own ship, the *Revenge*, by the powers.’

The Captain swung round at the words. ‘Art sure of that, Dan?’ he asked sharply.

‘Aye, ’tis the *Revenge*, and no other; I’d know her sleek sides among a thousand,’ replied Dan confidently.

The Captain scanned the horizon through his spy glass. ‘He sails alone, it seems,’ he declared.

‘Maybe ’tis well for us,’ growled Dan.

‘How many men will there be in Archer’s ship, Dan?’ asked the Captain.

‘Fifty—not less; a hundred, mebbe.’

‘ ’Tis a man-of-war she’s tackling, methinks.’

‘Sure, ’tis a frigate, with two score men in her or thereabouts—new lads, most likely—on their way to the Indies with stores. If she tackled the *Revenge*, sure ’tis a tartar she’s caught, by the bones of Saint Patrick.’

The Captain made up his mind suddenly. ‘Then as I’m an Englishman I’ll not stand by and see a ship of King James’s sunk by that band of sea robbers without lifting a finger to save it,’ he declared. ‘Bring us alongside, Dan. Mark, get below, my lad; this will be no place for you when we come to grips.’

The *Rose*’s deck was now buzzing like a disturbed beehive, as the watch below joined those on deck, cutlasses in their hands, many stripped to the waist.

Mark backed away, but he had no intention of going below. Instead, he ran a short distance up the ratlines, from where he would be able to see clearly what happened. A smile crossed his face as Will Greenaway’s voice was borne to his ears, singing.

The *Rose* by this time was not more than a quarter of a mile from the two ships already engaged. They were now almost touching, and while their guns thundered at point-blank range into each other’s sides, the crew of the pirate swarmed on the bulwarks in readiness to leap aboard the other the moment they came together. It was no doubt due to this that not one of them turned to seaward, or the *Rose* must have been discovered. As it was, she got within a biscuit’s throw before a wild yell from a pirate in the rigging of the barque revealed her presence to those below. It was at that precise moment that the sides of the two warring ships came together with a grinding crash.

For one dreadful moment Mark thought that Dan had either misjudged his distance, or gone crazy, for it looked as if the *Rose* must inevitably ram the barque. At the last moment, however, Dan swung his helm over, and the *Rose* came about gracefully, presenting her broadside to the pirate within half a score of yards. The pirate crew, thrown into confusion by this totally unexpected development, came pouring back across the deck. The guns of the *Rose* thundered, and in a flash the deck became a shambles.

Vainly the pirates strove to drag their guns to the side from which they had been taken, back to where they were now most needed; but the *Rose* poured in shot after shot, at the same time—since she was on the weather side—closing the gap between them.

Mark let out a yell of excitement as a boarding party, a small one, it is true, led by a midshipman not much older than himself, poured from the

frigate on to the deck of the pirate, and at the same moment Captain Champion leapt across the narrow gap on the opposite side. The gap closed, and the two ships came together. Half a dozen sailors followed the Captain, but before the remainder could get across the shock of impact had thrown the two ships apart again, a distance of several feet, leaving a gap too wide to be jumped.

Mark's exultation turned to horror when he saw that the Captain, with now only four men, was already being forced to retire before a much larger number of pirates led by a small, ferrety-looking man in a red nightcap, who was mingling orders with curses in a high-pitched voice as he wielded his cutlass in demoniac fury. The midshipman and his supporters, also outnumbered, had made a stand near the mainmast, where they were clearly having all their work cut out to hold their own, and were in no case to go to the Captain's assistance.

'Look! 'Tis Archer himself!' roared Dan, pointing at the man in the red nightcap. ' 'Tis the Captain he'll be after killing. Over, bhoys, over!'

But this was easier said than done, for the two ships were still wallowing a good fifteen feet apart, although a sailor had succeeded in throwing a grappling iron across the gap, and, with others helping him, was slowly dragging the two vessels together again.

Mark, in an agony of apprehension, saw that unless something was done very quickly the Captain would be lost, for only two of his men were still on their feet, and, in spite of the desperate efforts of the three to prevent it, several of the pirates were working round behind them.

Mark looked around desperately for some means of bridging the gap. There seemed to be only one way. Several stays and parts of the rigging that had been severed by shots were swinging between the two ships as they rocked in the swell; one rope that drooped from the pirate's yards was actually touching the sides of each ship as it swung to and fro. It was just returning to the ship to which it belonged.

Mark did not stop to think; the rope presented a chance, and he leapt at it—literally. For an instant he swung through space, spinning like a top; then the rope slipped through his fingers, burning the palms of his hands like fire, and he landed with a crash on the blood-stained deck of the pirate.

Snatching out his sword, he slid and skidded across the slippery deck towards the place where the Captain was still fighting. Archer was just levelling a pistol at him. Seeing that he would be too late to help, Mark, in sheer desperation, snatched up a discarded cutlass that had broken across the middle and, holding it by the blade, flung it with all his strength at the pirate.

The handle caught him in the back, on the spine, just below the nape of the neck, and he went down as if he had been shot, the pistol shooting one of his own men through the leg; he also fell, cursing luridly.

Mark only just had time to return his sword to his right hand before two of the pirates were upon him, their whirling cutlasses beating down his slender blade. It would have gone ill for him but for the fact that at that moment the two ships closed to within jumping distance, and, with a wild yell, the crew of the *Rose* hurled themselves pell-mell across the gap.

The two pirates who had been attacking Mark turned to flee before the irresistible onslaught, but one of them was too late, and he went down under a crushing blow from an iron bar which Pierro was wielding with deadly effect.

Dan led the rush that caught the main body of the pirates in the rear, and that practically ended the battle. A few of the pirates fought to the bitter end rather than be taken, but presently the few that were still on their feet called out for quarter, which was given.

The din of battle ceased abruptly and a strange silence fell, a hush broken only by the groaning of wounded men. Mark leaned against the mainmast, feeling suddenly sick, partly from shock, and partly, no doubt, from the gruesome scenes about him. It was his first battle, and it surpassed anything he had imagined, although, admittedly, the fight had been of an unusually bitter nature.

The Captain, his cravat gone and his coat slashed, came over to him. 'Faith, Mark,' he smiled, 'but you were in the nick of time. Ye saved my life without a doubt, and a smarter piece of work I never saw; yet if you would live long enough to command a ship of your own you will have to put a curb to your impetuosity. Have a care, lad.'

Further discussion on this subject was cut short by the arrival of the midshipman, now accompanied by a naval lieutenant, who, it turned out, was in command of the frigate. He had been severely wounded early in the engagement, yet he insisted on standing up to thank the Captain for his timely assistance.

'Lieutenant Markham, His Majesty's ship *Seahawk*, outward bound for Georgetown, at your service, sir,' he said gravely. 'To whom am I indebted for my salvation?'

'Captain Champion, sir, *Rose of England*; owner, Master Mark Lawson,' replied the Captain, bowing.

'Well, sir, you saved my ship,' observed the naval officer. 'I will see that your name is logged for rendering signal service to your king and country.'

‘In what case are you, sir?’ inquired the Captain.

‘We have suffered some hurt, I fear, and I have lost half my men, but I still have enough to take my ship to port.’

‘And these?’ The Captain pointed to the scowling prisoners.

‘’Twould be doing the world a service to hang them out of hand,’ replied the lieutenant grimly, ‘but I shall have to take them ashore for trial. They will hang, all the same, I make no doubt. Mr. Jackson, have these villains taken aboard and put in irons.’

Archer, who had been only stunned by Mark’s blow, fought like a wildcat when the sailors seized him, pouring out such a stream of blasphemy that Mark shuddered. He jabbered like a maniac as the sailors dragged him past where Mark was standing, uttering such frightful threats that a sailor clapped a grimy hand over his mouth.

The *Rose* lay by the *Seahawk* all that day, the survivors of both crews working on the frigate, using such parts of the pirate barque as they needed to make her seaworthy, for the *Rose* was practically untouched. The barque had been so damaged by the *Rose*’s guns that she was clearly not worth saving, and the naval officer decided to scuttle her. The Captain interceded, however, saying that there were still some parts of her rigging that he could make use of before she was sent to the bottom; he promised, however, to sink her when he had finished with her, and not leave the hulk to be a danger to other shipping.

To this the lieutenant readily agreed, and shortly afterwards, as the sun went down, proceeded on his voyage, taking with him three members of the *Rose*’s crew who had been seriously wounded.

As soon as passing salutes had been exchanged Mark turned a puzzled face to the Captain. ‘Why did you ask for the hulk?’ he asked. ‘Surely there is nothing——?’

‘’Twas Dan’s suggestion, although, in truth, I had a mind to save some of the guns,’ broke in the Captain. ‘Where is the rascal? Ah, there he is, coming back from the hulk. Sink me, he looks mighty pleased with himself.’

Dan was smiling all over his face as he clambered over the splintered bulwarks of the pirate ship and came to where they were standing. Observing that they were watching him closely, he stuck his tongue in his cheek like a precocious child.

‘Well, what is it?’ asked the Captain.

‘Sure, sorr, but ’tis as I thought; there are a few things in Archer’s ship that we may as well have in our own before we send her to Davy Jones,’ he grinned.

‘What sort of things?’

‘Didst ever hear of a pirate without *something* in her hold worth having?’

The Captain started. ‘You mean—there’s *plunder* in her?’

‘Sure, and me having once . . . er . . . been aboard a pirate craft—when I was a bhoys, you’ll understand—knew where to look for it. And there, begorra, so it is; not much in the way of guineas, but a rare load of fine stuffs that Archer had just taken from a merchantman, no doubt, for which the traders in Tortuga will pay good money, I’m thinking.’

‘You know a deal about it, you rogue,’ said the Captain shrewdly, but, nevertheless, he was pleased at the news, for plunder was the last thing he had thought of when he attacked the pirate.

The haul proved to be a rich one, the entire cargo, apparently, of some unfortunate merchantman that had fallen foul of the pirate, and the Captain chuckled at the naval officer’s oversight in not searching for it. No doubt he was too concerned about the state of his ship to worry about extra cargo. There was not much in cash—a matter of seventy-five guineas, and some silver—but there were some hundreds of bolts of fine cloth that would certainly fetch a lot of money when the *Rose* reached port. These, with several barrels of beef, pork, coffee, and other stores, were transferred to the *Rose*, after which, by lantern light, taking advantage of the calm which the Captain thought might not last long, the fourteen guns the pirate mounted were also brought over the side, with all the powder and shot she carried.

There being nothing more worth saving, the doomed ship was set on fire and cast adrift. The Captain then gave orders to Dan to set the ship’s carpenters at work, first thing in the morning, cutting new portholes for the extra guns.

As there was nothing else to be done, the Captain and Mark then went below to eat a belated meal.

‘Well, that’s first blood to us, and one of the Butcher’s captains out of the way,’ observed the Captain, as he took his place at the table.

‘I trust that we may rid the seas of the others as easily,’ said Mark, optimistically.

The Captain threw him a sidelong glance. ‘We shall be fortunate indeed to do that, methinks,’ he answered doubtfully.

MARK GOES ASHORE AT TORTUGA

MARK GOES ASHORE AT TORTUGA

SHORTLY after dawn, three days later, the *Rose* made her landfall without further adventure: the wild, rugged island of Tortuga,^[5] the headquarters of the most notorious pirates, buccaneers, and freebooters^[6] the world has ever known, dreadful scoundrels for the most part, but undeniably brave. Here they could live in perfect safety while their ships rode at anchor under the protecting guns of the fort which they had built, from time to time to sally forth and scour the seas, or ravage the settlements on the Spanish Main.

[5] Tortuga was, at the time of which we are writing, a natural fortress, wellnigh impregnable. It was never taken. Had the pirates been able to agree they might have formed a powerful country of their own, but the English and French factions fell out, and the great organization of the 'Brethren of the Coast' crumbled. Nevertheless, it was the birthplace of British power in the West Indies. To-day Tortuga is a savage jungle-clad island, practically uninhabited. It is about twenty-five miles long by three miles wide.

[6] It is rather an odd fact that the English used the French word *boucaniers*, while the French employed the English word *freebooters*.

Several ships were lying in the harbour, and Mark looked at them curiously, knowing that as an honest merchantman would be as out of place as a rabbit in a lion's den, they must all belong to pirates.

'Is Rochelle's ship here?' the Captain asked Dan, noticing that the quartermaster was handling the *Rose* with all the assurance of familiarity.

'No, the *Merry Hammer* is not at home, your honour,' answered Dan, glancing round. 'There is the *Good Exchange*, though, which means that Captain Coxon must be about—him as took the *Santa Maria* off Porto Bello eight years back. Sure, it was a great march through the woods across the place they call Darien.'

'You seem to know all about it,' replied the Captain blandly, with a wink at Mark.

Dan did not answer; he appeared to be much interested in the town they were fast approaching.

A moment or two later a gun boomed and a shot splashed into the water near the *Rose's* bows. A cloud of smoke rose slowly into the air above the fort.

'Faith, they don't seem to like the look of us,' said the Captain quickly.

' 'Tis the Jolly Roger we should be showing, I'm after thinking,' declared Dan.

Mark had amused himself during the voyage by making a flag out of some black cloth which they had taken out of Archer's ship, the device, portrayed in white, being the top half of a grinning skeleton with bony arms outstretched. This was quickly run up to the peak, after which no more shots were fired, although as the anchor splashed down into the turquoise depths Mark could see several groups of men near the booths that lined the waterfront, obviously interested in the new arrival.

The Captain spoke to Dan again. 'I am going ashore,' he said; 'first to buy stores, if they are to be had, and, secondly, if I can find a buyer, to sell the cloth we have aboard. We shall need money to pay for the stores. The men can go ashore half a score at a time; that is as many as I dare let out of the ship until we see what sort of reception we shall have. Tell those who go ashore to attend to their behaviour so that we do not become involved in any trouble, and to keep their lips sealed as to whence we came, and our purpose. Any man who comes back drunk will have forty lashes, which should sober him.'

These orders given, the Captain and Mark were rowed ashore, where they landed under many curious eyes. The Captain went off to pay his respects to the Governor—for the French had an official Governor in residence—and to attend to the matters that had brought him ashore, while Mark, having no great interest in these things, decided that he would prefer to wander about and explore the port.

Most of the front he found occupied with grog-shops, after the manner of Port Royal, which did not in the least surprise him; indeed, he would only have been surprised had it been otherwise. Radiating inland from the shore were narrow streets of shops and stalls, with all sorts of merchandise and gaudy finery displayed to tempt the buccaneers who came ashore with as much gold in their pockets as they could carry. Drinking booths, often no more than two or three planks resting on barrels, with rum puncheons and wine bottles lined up on them, were everywhere, and did a roaring trade with the crowding sailors, most of whom wore cotton trousers, gaily

coloured shirts, and handkerchiefs tied round their heads. Nearly all of them were filthy, their uncut hair hanging low over their shoulders and their moustaches drooping round their unshaven chins. From all sides came the sound of ribald laughter and singing.

Through this motley crowd Indian and negro slaves moved with cat-like tread. Here and there piles of goods lay before the traders' wooden houses: kegs of rum, bags of sugar, and bales of tobacco, with here and there a few bolts of cloth—all booty from the merchant ships which had been taken by the pirates.

Mark's lips closed in a tight line as he regarded this evidence of robbery of which his father might have been a victim. However, he was in no case to speak his thoughts, so he controlled his indignation as well as he could.

Towards midday, sickened and subdued by what he had seen, he made his way back to the waterfront, where, after a short wait, the Captain joined him.

'Hast finished, John?' asked Mark.

'Almost, thank heaven,' replied the Captain, mopping his face with his handkerchief, for the heat was intense. 'All is finished except that I must meet the merchant for the final settling. The stores are now going aboard, and the boat is bringing back the cloth which I have sold. Go back to the *Rose* if the stench of this place offends your nostrils; or, if you will, wait for me on the terrace of the 'Golden Guinea' tavern, which is a pleasant place as I know, for I called there a moment ago for a tankard of sack to quench my thirst. It is less noisy than these hovels by the waterfront; also there is a terrace on which you may sit in the shade. Await me there and I will join you.'

'In which direction does it lie?' asked Mark.

'On the hill-side—yonder. It stands alone, overlooking the bay, so it can scarce be missed.'

'How long will you be?'

'An hour mayhap—not more.'

'Very well, I will wait for you there,' said Mark. So saying, he turned away in the direction the Captain had indicated, and a walk of a few minutes brought him to the place, a large, well-built hostelry, of much better character than any he had yet seen. The customers, too, were different, comprising men of better class, although there was the usual gathering of sailors in the tap-room.

Mark went right through the building and found himself on a pleasant terrace, paved with large flagstones, shaded by overhanging vines, with seats

cut in the living rock round the outside. In the centre there was a fish-pond, and, impelled by curiosity, towards this he made his way; but finding that it was only half full of stagnant water, which stank abominably, he crossed over to a seat and settled himself down to wait.

Looking out to sea he noticed a brigantine coming into the harbour, but he paid little attention to it, for his mind was concerned with other things.

The terrace, which occupied a fairly large area some twenty or more paces square, was almost deserted when he had entered it, but now several of those who had been inside came out, tankards or goblets in their hands, and stood talking in low tones, occasionally looking down into the anchorage. Mark was more interested in them than in what was going on below. Some were well dressed, as if they might be captains of ships, while others were clearly officers—doctors, quartermasters, and the like. There was also a sprinkling of common sailors, and it amazed Mark to see how they squandered their money on liquor, often throwing down a gold piece in payment and not deigning to pick up the change.

Two such as these sat down on a bench not far from him and began talking in loud tones, regardless of who overheard them.

‘Aye, it’s Benito,’ said one. ‘He’ll be looking for some brisk lads, I’m told, for the Butcher’s next frolic.’

Mark stiffened at the name, and pricked up his ears.

‘That’ll be it,’ nodded the other. ‘Well, I’ll be there, wherever it may be, for the Butcher is the man for me.’

‘’Tis a stout pair of shoes ye’ll need, though you’ll be eating ’em as like as not afore you get back,’ declared the first speaker humorously. ‘No more o’ these ’ere jungle jaunts for me.’

‘It’s jungle then, is it?’

‘Puerto Novo, on the South Sea, so I’ve heard tell. Sixty miles of footing it with nothin’ to eat but berries, and nothin’ to drink but water.’

‘Well, I’ve done it afore, and I’ll do it again,’ swore the other. ‘Do you mind the time we took Panama, Joe, with Morgan, sixteen years back, it must be, close on? Morgan was a one and no mistake. We picked up some blunt^[7] there, *if* you like.’^[8]

^[7] Money.

^[8] Henry Morgan, with an army of 1,400 buccaneers, marched across the Isthmus of Panama and sacked the town in 1671.

‘Rochelle’s as brisk, from all account, though a mite handy cutting up his prisoners.’

‘When does he reckon to start?’

‘As soon as he’s got the ships and lads together, so they say.’

‘And what’s the course?’

‘Same as Morgan, he says. Start from the cove near the Chagraw,^[9] march up the bank, collect the doubloons, sport with the Dons for a bit, and then ’ome. Leastways, that’s what he says.’

^[9] The speaker probably meant the River Chagres.

‘How many lads has he got now?’

‘Around three hundred; most of ’em Frenchies and some turncoat Spaniards. Benito’s beating up for more, because the Butcher don’t want to start with less than four hundred.’

To Mark’s intense disappointment this engaging conversation ended abruptly, for there came a sudden stir, and several new-comers appeared on the terrace; and in spite of the thrill his newly acquired knowledge inspired in him, these new arrivals at once attracted his attention. One was a man of middle age, as swarthy as an Indian, sleek, with curling black moustachios and a small pointed beard. Huge golden ear-rings swung from his ears. For the rest, he was dressed in the height of fashion—absurdly so, in fact, since no gentleman of quality would have bedecked himself in such a variety of brilliantly coloured silks and satins. He was obviously a foreigner, an Italian or a creole—probably the latter, Mark decided.

The other was an even more conspicuous object. He was a lanky youth, sixteen or seventeen years of age, with a sallow face pitted and scarred by smallpox, or some other disfiguring disease. His nose was long, thin, and sharply pointed, while his ears, abnormally large, projected from his head almost at right-angles. His expression was at once so insolent and his manner so overbearing that Mark took an instant and violent dislike to him.

A moment or two later a sailor came in, and after saluting the swarthy man, addressed him. Mark caught the name, Captain Pallanca, and realized that he was looking at the man he hated most after Rochelle himself—Benito Pallanca, once the Butcher’s quartermaster, now his most redoubtable captain. It occurred to him that it must have been his ship that had just come

into the harbour, and he looked down into the anchorage anxiously, half expecting to see the *Merry Hammer*, Rochelle's own ship, but to his relief it was not there. He was keen enough to see the man who he had good reason to suppose had murdered his father, but Tortuga was not the place for the encounter since there were too many of his own kind there.

So taken up was Mark by these proceedings that he scarcely noticed what had been going on around him. A movement now made him look up, and he saw a serving-man, an Indian, proffering what appeared to be a glass of rum or brandy.

'Thank you,' said Mark quietly, 'but I am not thirsty at this moment; nor, for that matter, do I drink spirits at any time.'

A look, almost of fear, passed over the Indian's face, and he glanced apprehensively over his shoulder to where the ill-favoured youth was standing with a glass in his hand.

A sudden hush fell.

'I am about to drink a toast,' said the youth loudly. 'When I drink, all drink, by thunder, or I want to know the reason why.'

Mark did not move. His only feeling was one of complete contempt for the arrogant young man who attempted to cut such a figure before his elders.

Slowly and with great deliberation the youth walked over to where Mark was sitting. 'Are you deaf, fellow?' he said coldly.

'No, I hear quite well,' replied Mark quietly.

'Blind, maybe?'

'I also see very well,' returned Mark calmly.

Before he could even guess what the other was going to do, he had received the entire contents of his glass in his eyes. The spirit stung like fire, but he did not show it. He took out his kerchief, mopped his face quite dry, and then, as far as his smarting eyes would permit, looked round the grinning assembly.

'Ye don't see so well now, I'll warrant,' cried the youth, and laughed raucously at his own jest.

Mark waited for a moment until his vision was perfectly restored; then he rose to his feet and walked slowly to where the youth was standing. With lightning speed his hand flew out and caught the youth such a box on the ear that he staggered.

'And you, my friend, do not hear quite so well as you did, I think,' he said grimly.

The youth had his sword out in an instant, but Mark was ready, and the gleaming steel clashed harmlessly against his own. For a second they stood thus, blade against blade, their faces not a foot apart, Mark's calm eyes gazing into the furious ones of the other. Then they both sprang back.

'I'll spit you like a partridge,' snarled the youth with a vivid oath.

'If your sword were as long as your ears no doubt ye would,' taunted Mark.

This insulting reference to what was, did Mark but know it, a very sensitive spot in the youth's vanity seemed to goad him to frenzy, and without further words he attempted to make good his boast. And for a moment or two it looked as if he might succeed, such was the fury of his attack.

At the clash of steel all those inside the tavern had run out, and they now formed a circle round the combatants, most of them encouraging the youth.

Never before had such a call been made upon Mark's sword-play, and never was he more truly grateful for the iron wrist that his father's training had given him. He needed it, but he stood his ground, contenting himself with defence, allowing the other to exhaust himself in his passion, as was sooner or later inevitable. Watching his opponent's eyes, he saw every fleeting expression that flashed through them—at first surprise, then, when he could not break through Mark's guard, incredulity. This was followed by doubt, and presently by fear.

Mark knew the instant the attack began to weaken, but he had no intention of allowing it to weaken. The *tempo* of his own weapon increased, and the other was forced to keep pace with it.

'Come, boaster, where is your partridge?' sneered Mark.

The other's face was pale; his breath was coming faster, and there was a wild look in his eyes.

Still without moving, Mark increased the pressure on his adversary's guard, and when, a moment later, the youth was compelled to take a pace backward, he knew that he had his man beaten. The youth knew it, too, for he abandoned offensive tactics entirely and fought only to defend himself.

Mark's sword became a darting silver streak as he attacked in earnest, and the youth was compelled to back faster and faster to save himself. Mark followed, as relentless as death. Once the youth's swarthy companion came into Mark's line of vision, his drawn sword in his hand, as if he would have come to his protégé's assistance, but a tall figure intervened and the fight went on.

Back, and still farther back Mark forced his opponent, whose breath was now coming in loud, wheezing gasps.

The end came with ludicrous suddenness. Mark's point darted through the other's guard and the youth leapt backward to save himself. His heels caught against the stone kerb that surrounded the fish-pond, and in a moment he had gone head over heels backward into the middle of it.

Mark dropped his point at once, while the youth, dripping with slime, foul weeds festooning his face and neck, dragged himself, panting, from the pool that had undoubtedly saved his life.

There was a shout of laughter in which Mark did not join. 'Wouldst finish the game?' he asked his opponent courteously.

But the youth had had enough. If looks could kill Mark would have been stricken dead on the spot. With his face convulsed with hate and fury, the youth covered his discomfiture by running into the tavern. Mark shrugged his shoulders and then looked about him.

THE BUTCHER ARRIVES

CHAPTER VII

THE BUTCHER ARRIVES

To his astonishment, the first person he saw was the Captain, in the centre of a group, engaged in conversation with the overdressed man, who at that moment was speaking.

‘What is zis?’ he asked, with ludicrous affectation. ‘You not know *me*—ze great Pallanca?’

‘’Tis an honour I have been denied,’ replied the Captain courteously.

‘Zis brat was like to ’ave killed Rochelle’s boy—what zen?’ demanded Pallanca, pointing an accusing finger at Mark. ‘Am I to get ze cut of ze throat because he kills Rochelle’s boy, ha?’

‘He did not kill Rochelle’s boy,’ pointed out the Captain evenly. ‘If he started the brawl, he shall be punished.’ The Captain beckoned to Mark, who moved nearer to the group. ‘Who started that squabble?’ he asked sternly.

‘Not I,’ declared Mark. ‘He threw rum into my eyes.’

‘Who drew first?’

‘He did. I was compelled to draw to defend myself.’

‘That were true enough, for I saw it all from start to finish,’ declared a grizzled old man. ‘The boy swung as pretty a blade as ever I see, at that, and if he’d been mine——’

‘Zilence!’ Pallanca spat out the word, and the old man recoiled. ‘Ze boy is Rochelle’s. If any ’arm come to ’im—zut!’ He concluded with a significant gesture.

To Mark’s great astonishment, Pallanca laid his hand on the Captain’s arm. ‘Zis is a good ship you ’ave,’ he purred insinuatingly. ‘Rochelle is looking for good ships. Maybe you will sell it—yes?’

The Captain stroked his chin. ‘Maybe,’ he said, ‘but I must first speak to my lads on board.’

‘I can find good work for zem all—good work, you understand?’ put in Pallanca quickly.

‘Then I’ll go down and speak to them, and be ready to talk to Rochelle when he comes,’ said the Captain.

Pallanca glanced out to sea. ‘He comes now,’ he said.

Mark followed his eyes—as, indeed, did every one else—and he saw a tall ship with beautiful lines standing into the offing. A conspicuous feature was her main tops'l, which was blood-red.

Mark's heart missed a beat and he looked at the Captain with questioning eyes, but if the Captain felt any concern he did not show it.

'I'll be seeing ye anon,' said he casually, and turned towards the exit.

'Rochelle will be needing your ship,' called Pallanca after him, meaningly.

'He shall have it,' answered the Captain over his shoulder. 'If he can get it,' he added in an undertone.

Once out of the 'Golden Guinea', the Captain quickened his pace. 'We'd best get out of this,' he said tersely. 'What with you smirching the honour of Rochelle's son, and the father on the lookout for ships, 'twill be hard words that are flying presently, or I'm a Dutchman. How came you to fight with that young scallywag, Mark?'

Briefly, as they hurried down the hill, Mark described the incident.

'So that was the way of it?' observed the Captain when he had finished. 'Pity ye didn't run the braggart through, though.'

'I would so, had the fish-pond not been there,' declared Mark firmly. 'No man shall throw rum in my eyes and live to boast of it while I have a sword at my side. Still, mayhap it is better thus, not to have the fellow's blood on my hands.'

'He'll have yours on his, if the opportunity ever comes his way,' the Captain told him grimly. 'Sink me, but I never saw such hate on any human being's face as there was on that young ruffian's. Ye'll need to keep your weather eye open, Mark, if ever ye come near him again. So he's Rochelle's brat, eh? Like father, like son, by the look of it, and since you've made an enemy of the son you've made one of the father.'

'The father was my enemy before the son was,' Mark reminded him.

Several times during the walk down the hill the Captain had glanced behind him. 'We are well out of that, Mark,' he said. 'Faith, things were looking ugly at one time, though you were too busy to notice it.'

'How so?'

'Pallanca, when he saw Rochelle's boy was beat, would have run you through the back. His sword was half out when I walked on to the terrace. Mine was half out, too, when I asked him if I could be of service to him. He was looking round to see how much support he could count on when he spied Rochelle's ship coming, and, recollecting his mission, he changed his

tune in the hopes of getting our ship. To kill the master would not have been the best way to do that, and he knew it, the cunning hound.'

'You'll not let him take the ship?'

'Not while there is a man alive on her, or an ounce of powder for her guns.'

'What, then?'

'We'll drift out on the tide at sundown, methinks, to save any further argument. If Rochelle tries to take us by force, and he may when he learns what has happened, why, then, we must cut and run for it. We've stores aboard, and ten new guns, so we've nothing more to stay for. Ah, there's Dan with the boat; I'm not sorry to see it, either, for I'd half a fear that Pallanca might change his mind. That's some charming company Dan has with him,' continued the Captain, wrinkling his forehead. 'What's in his mind, I wonder?'

A dozen men were standing by the water's edge talking to Dan when they reached the boat. The Captain looked from them to the quartermaster, who saluted.

' 'Tis old friends of mine, they are, your honour,' he explained. 'And a nice cruise they'd be after, beloike. A bunch of handy lads they are, begorra, every one of them.'

The Captain ran a critical eye over the recruits. He knew that they were buccaneers, every one of them, but he had no objection to that—quite otherwise, in fact—provided they could be trusted. He needed a few extra hands.

'Are you sure of them, Dan?' he asked frankly.

'As sure as me old mother would be of her son, by the bones of Saint Pathrick,' swore Dan.

'All right, my lads,' said the Captain. 'I'll read the articles to you as soon as we are aboard. It's short shrift he'll have from me if there's a scurvy traitor among ye. Into the boat with ye.'

There was a chorus of 'Ay, ay, sir' from the men, who seemed pleased at their acceptance, but before they could all get into the boat there was a shout from not far away.

Looking up, Mark saw Pallanca, with several men at his heels, running towards them.

'What are you doing wis my *matelots*?'^[10] asked Pallanca harshly.

[10] French word for ‘sailor’, frequently used on the coast.

The Captain raised his eyebrows. ‘Yours?’ He looked at the men questioning, several of whom muttered dissents. ‘Why now, Captain Pallanca,’ he resumed, ‘they say they are not your men.’

‘I spoke to zem only zis morning,’ cried Pallanca, angrily.

‘Why then, here they are; they can choose for themselves,’ offered the Captain. ‘It shall never be said that I stole any man’s crew.’

But the sailors all sat still.

‘Out of zat boat, you scum,’ screamed Pallanca.

‘Not so fast, Pallanca,’ put in the Captain curtly. ‘It’s come to a fine thing if a man mayn’t choose his own master.’

Pallanca glared; he had not enough men with him to threaten. Suddenly his eyes gleamed, and Mark, following the direction of them, saw a boat, loaded to the gunwales with men, surging through the water towards the beach from the ship that had just put in.

The Captain saw it, too, and a faint smile crossed his face. ‘All right, my lads, if you are all of a mind,’ he cried, and took his place in the *Rose*’s boat, which was now afloat. Mark joined him.

Pallanca wavered in indecision, evidently loth to make a mistake under the eyes of his chief. Meanwhile, the boat was pushed off, and was soon skimming over the placid water towards the schooner.

From their seats Mark and the Captain watched the men from the *Merry Hammer*’s boat land, and a massive figure engage in earnest conversation with Pallanca, who emphasized his words with frequent and vigorous gestures towards the *Rose*.

‘Methinks we shall not be popular in Tortuga after this,’ observed the Captain with a smile, as the boat drew alongside the *Rose*. ‘Make ready to sail, Dan. The tide’s on the turn, I perceive, and we’ll get out without blows being struck if we can. We’ll have another parley with Captain Pallanca, and his master, in our own place and time.’

But before the anchor could be weighed the *Merry Hammer*’s boat was racing towards them under the powerful strokes of a dozen men. In the stern sat Pallanca and the big man who had been talking to him on the beach, and Mark had little doubt but that he was looking at the pirate who had murdered his father.

‘Methinks we shall have to have a word with Master Rochelle after all,’ observed the Captain, as he leaned over the bulwarks watching the fast-approaching boat.

Mark’s eyes were riveted on Rochelle. At close quarters he was a huge, uncouth-looking ruffian with a mane of black hair hanging down over his neck and shoulders, which made him look more like an animal than a man; hair of the same colour, cut square, covered his chin below a large, loose mouth. His eyes were perhaps his worst feature; they were small, set close together, and were slightly oblique, almost like those of a Chinese, suggesting that there was an oriental streak in his ancestry. On his head he wore a feathered hat instead of the more usual bandana. A shirt of scarlet silk, open at the neck and half-way down his chest, revealed a massive torso, while slung across his shoulders so that the ends hung down on either side was a broad sash carrying half a dozen pistols. Altogether he was a formidable brute who looked what his reputation declared him to be—a butcher; and Mark went cold at the thought of any one he knew falling into his hands, for neither mercy nor pity could exist behind such a face. He could well believe now the stories he had heard of the man’s unspeakable cruelties.

‘A monster,’ murmured the Captain quietly. ‘Keep your temper, lad, whatever happens. Should he come aboard—why, then, perchance . . .’

A hail from the boat interrupted him. It had stopped a few yards short of the *Rose*. Clearly, the wily pirate had no intention of stepping into what might turn out to be a trap.

Rochelle stood up, feet apart, balancing himself easily to the movement of the boat. ‘Where’s Champion?’ he called in a coarse, husky voice, the sound of which sent a shiver down Mark’s back.

‘Captain Champion, by your leave,’ said the Captain coolly.

‘There’s only one captain in these waters, and he’s talking to you now,’ returned Rochelle harshly.

‘And there’s only one captain on this ship, and his name isn’t Rochelle,’ answered the Captain lightly.

The pirate’s face broke into a grin. ‘Sink me, but I like your sauce,’ he declared. ‘I’ve needs for the like of you. Why did you quit in such a hurry? Come ashore, and we’ll talk.’

‘I can hear all you have to say from here, Rochelle,’ replied the Captain calmly.

The grin was quickly replaced by a frown. ‘Why, what’s wrong with me?’ demanded Rochelle.

‘You should know that better than any one,’ the Captain told him frankly.

‘Ay, and you’ll know, too, one day, maybe,’ grated Rochelle vindictively, unable to conceal his chagrin.

‘I know it already,’ observed the Captain, wondering if he should order Will Greenaway to train a gun on the boat and rid the world of a villain there and then. Later he was to regret that he did not do so.

Meanwhile Rochelle stood glowering, apparently undecided what to do. Once or twice he fingered his pistol, but his eyes wandered to the *Rose’s* guns, and whatever it was he had in mind he thought better of it. ‘Well, I’ve no time to waste argying; I’ll see ye again,’ he said at last, and sat down, whereupon the rowers started to pull away.

The Captain flung an order over his shoulder to Dan. ‘Get her away, Dan,’ he said tersely. ‘Rochelle is edging towards his ship; we’ll have his wolves aboard us before we know where we are, if we linger.’

In a moment the *Rose’s* decks and upper works were buzzing with activity as the crew sprang readily to their tasks; and it was soon clear that the Captain’s premonition of danger was well founded, for a long-boat splashed on the water beside the *Merry Hammer*, and a crowd of pirates swarmed down her sides into it.

‘I wonder what Rochelle would say if he knew what has befallen Archer, and that the goods I sold in the town this morning were his?’ smiled the Captain, as he watched these activities.

Two more boats had been launched from the *Merry Hammer*, and the three of them came surging across the still water encouraged by Rochelle; but the *Rose* was already on the move. Her bows swung round to the open sea, and she heeled a little as her sails caught the breeze. Whereupon the boats, seeing that they would not be able to overtake her, pulled up.

The Captain raised his hand ironically to them. ‘Methinks we have overstayed our welcome in Tortuga,’ he said quietly to Mark.

‘John,’ said Mark eagerly, ‘let us go below. I have important news for you.’

The Captain threw him a quick look. ‘Faith, you’ve kept it a long time,’ he complained.

‘I’ve had no chance to tell you before,’ answered Mark, as they went down to the cabin.

‘Well, lad, and what is it?’ asked the Captain, picking up a long-stemmed pipe and lighting it.

Mark faced him eagerly. ‘ ’Tis about Rochelle,’ he said. ‘He’s raising a force with the intention of taking Puerto Novo, on the Main, by storm. He and Pallanca, and all their men, are going to land at a cove near a place called Chagraw, and march overland across the isthmus.’

‘Morgan’s old trick, eh?’

‘That is what they said—or something like that.’

‘Who said? How did you learn this?’

‘I overheard two men talking at the “Golden Guinea” tavern. They had been asked to go on the raid, I think, but one of them, who from his talk must have been with Morgan, did not seem over-anxious to go.’

‘Faith, and that does not surprise me,’ declared the Captain. ‘Starvation in the jungle, Indians, leeches as fat as your thumb, mosquitoes by the million, and, above all, the Spaniards. It’s the rack and the fire for those who are caught by the Dons.’

Mark nodded. ‘So I’ve heard tell, but Rochelle and his crew seem to fear neither Spaniard nor devil.’

‘Which are the same thing, some say,’ smiled the Captain. Then he became serious. ‘What was in your mind about this, Mark?’ he asked.

‘Why, don’t you see, it’s the best chance we shall ever have of laying the villain Rochelle by the heels.’

‘If you think of betraying him to the Dons——’

‘No such thought was in my mind,’ replied Mark shortly. ‘But here is something we might attempt. Rochelle is having difficulty in getting men. He has some, mostly French and other foreigners, and when he has four hundred he will go, so ’twas said. Some will be lost in the forest for certain, dying of pestilence or famine; others will fall in the attack on the palisades of Puerto Novo; those who return will be weary, wounded perhaps, and heavy laden. They will be scattered in a long line by the time they reach the place where the ship is left. If we were there, in ambush, we could cut them down, seize the treasure, and take Rochelle prisoner, and haul him before the justices.’

The Captain raised an eyebrow. ‘Justices? At Port Royal?’

‘There are other towns, where they have an honest Governor; Georgetown, for example.’

The Captain laid his pipe on the table. His eyes were gleaming. ‘By thunder, Mark, methinks you’re right. We’ll ask Dan to give us his views on this. Give him a hail.’

Mark ran up the companion and found Dan at the helm. At Mark's request it was handed over to a seaman, and the two went down to the cabin.

The Captain did not beat about the bush. 'Dan,' he said tersely, 'you were with Morgan in the taking of Panama?'

Dan's eyes opened wide in childish surprise. 'Why, by the bones of Saint Patrick, and that's a foine thing you'd be saying,' he blustered.

'Ye may as well own up,' the Captain told him grimly. 'I've known it all along.'

'And phwat if Oi was?' demanded Dan.

'Because if ye know the forest trail, then it's a bag of gold ye'll be carrying presently,' the Captain declared, and forthwith told him of Rochelle's proposed expedition and Mark's plan.

When he had finished Dan slapped his thigh. Then suddenly his eyes blazed. ' 'Tis Rochelle's head I'll be carrying,' he growled, 'for 'twas him who sliced off the ears of me, and me bound hand and foot, the dirty spalpeen.'

The Captain stared. 'Oh-ho, oh-ho, so that was the way of it, was it? Now I begin to understand why you have no love for Master Rochelle. How came you to be with him?'

'Sure, and if it's questions you'd be asking—'

'All right. We'll say no more about it,' smiled the Captain, with a wink at Mark. 'Do you know this creek, by Chagraw River?'

'Ay, I know it as I know me mother's old back yard in Belfast Town.'

'Are there any others near it?'

' 'Tis scores there are along the coast.'

'Could you lay us a course to one of them where we could lie snug until Rochelle is on his way to Puerto Novo?'

'To a score, belike.'

'One will be enough,' smiled the Captain. 'Set the ship on her course, then, and find out how the men feel about the venture.'

ON THE SPANISH MAIN

CHAPTER VIII

ON THE SPANISH MAIN

MARK leaned over the rail, looking with curious eyes at the rampant vegetation of the tropic forest, not much more than a cable's length away, as the *Rose's* anchor splashed down into the translucent depths of the little cove into which Dan had brought her.

Nearly a fortnight had elapsed since the Captain had made his decision to put Mark's plan into action, and, while the days had not been entirely without interest, no event of importance had occurred—certainly nothing to necessitate a change of plan. A hurricane lasting for three days had driven the *Rose* many miles off her course, created a good deal of work, and caused a delay, but otherwise doing no damage. A man-of-war had tried to get a close look at them, but it had been given the slip during the night, much to the Captain's relief, for the last thing he wanted was to find himself engaged in a battle against his own country-men. Two other vessels had been encountered; from one, a British snow, some fish had been bought; from the other, a French barque, they had taken some coffee and tobacco, there being nothing else on board worth confiscating. They had then given the barque back to her captain, much to his astonishment and joy. That was all.

On the morning of the thirteenth day Dan had made his promised landfall, and the Captain was compelled to admit that nothing could have suited their purpose better.

The cove was a small, natural harbour, almost landlocked, the entrance being so narrow that a ship unaware of its existence might easily pass it by. What was equally important was the fact that it was only a few miles—not more than ten, so Dan affirmed—from the creek at the mouth of the river which, it was understood, Rochelle proposed using as his base. So, one way and another, the cove was an ideal anchorage.

The Captain, smoking his pipe, joined Mark at the rail. 'Well, lad, here we are,' he said cheerfully. 'A snug little spot, if ever I saw one. I am sending a party ashore for fresh water; Dan says he knows where there is some. Would you care to go?'

''Twould do my legs good to stretch them awhile,' replied Mark promptly. 'But tell me, John,' he went on, 'how do ye propose to find out if Rochelle has arrived, or to know when he does arrive? Methinks that if he escaped the tempest that drove us from our course he might arrive at any time.'

‘I have just been turning that very point over in my mind,’ answered the Captain. ‘Our best plan is to send a boat along the coast, keeping hard by the shore, to scout the creek.’

‘Why not send a party along the strand?’

‘Because there is a risk of Indians. That’s one point. For another, why, there may be a place, a swamp or the like, that cannot be crossed. ’Twould be safer to send a boat; it can travel by night with little risk of being seen. Drake did his scouting that way in the early days, so ’tis said, and so, forsooth, did Morgan, not so long ago. But the boat is standing by to fetch the water. Are you going?’

‘Can ye not come as well?’

‘What, captain and quartermaster ashore at the same time? Dan is going to lead the party to the water.’

‘Ah, I forgot,’ smiled Mark, hurrying down to the waist where the boat was waiting. ‘I’ll see ye anon,’ he concluded, as he dropped lightly into it.

‘Have you got a pistol in your pocket?’

‘Nay, but I’ll not need one; and I’d sooner trust to my sword, at that.’

The boat was pushed off. Two score strokes and the keel grated softly on a beach of white coral sand. The men got out, taking their water casks with them, and the boat was hauled up high and dry.

‘Where’s your pool, Dan?’ asked Mark.

Dan pointed to the forest. ‘Sure, and that’s the way it lies,’ he said. ‘ ’Tis warm work it will be, toiling through the trees,’ he grumbled.

‘How far is it?’

‘A mile or so, maybe.’

‘Then I don’t think I’ll come with you,’ announced Mark. ‘It looks dark and damp and hot in the forest, so I’ll stick to the open and take a turn or two along the beach to get the stiffness out of my joints.’

‘As ye will,’ nodded Dan, and picking up a barrel, led the way into the forest ahead of his men.

Mark strolled along the beach, interested by the scenery around him. He did not trouble to make a time for returning to the boat, for the *Rose* herself was within hail, and he could have swum out to her had it been necessary. For a little while as he walked along he watched the edge of the forest apprehensively, but as time wore on, and he saw no sign of life, he proceeded at a sharper pace.

For the best part of an hour he walked on, by which time, having rounded several points, the *Rose* was out of sight. Then, deciding that he had

come far enough for safety, he sat down to take a short rest before starting on the homeward journey.

Hardly was he seated when a sound was borne to his ears that brought him to his feet again, eyes questing along the beach. It came from a long way off, but there was no mistaking it. It was a musket shot. Moreover, as it came from the direction opposite the one in which the *Rose* lay, it was clear that it had not been fired by one of the ship's crew. The obvious solution was that Rochelle had arrived at his jumping-off place, and the shot had been fired by one of his men.

Mark's first and instinctive decision was to return at once to the *Rose* and inform the Captain, but then it struck him that he must be nearly half-way to the so-called Chagraw creek, in which case a brisk walk of not more than an hour would take him to it. Turning the matter over in his mind, he felt that in spite of what the Captain had said about the advisability of making a reconnaissance at night, much more could be learned in daylight. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to count Rochelle's men in the dark, he reflected, or see what sort of fellows they were, whereas in broad daylight both these important points could be ascertained. He looked along the beach, and studied the fringe of the forest. Everything was quiet. The more he thought about it the more the plan appealed to him, for there seemed to be little risk in carrying it out. Making up his mind suddenly, he ran up to the edge of the forest, and then set off at a brisk pace in the direction from which the musket shot had come.

His estimate as to how long it would take him to reach the creek proved to be wrong, for at the end of an hour and a half he had still not come to it, although this was in some degree due to the caution he was now constrained to employ. The sun blazed down, and he half regretted his hasty decision, but, since he had come so far, the thought of turning back was distasteful, so he kept on.

A few minutes later he heard the confused murmur of human voices ahead, so he forsook the beach, and, forcing his way through the dense undergrowth of the forest, soon came upon a scene that afforded him the greatest satisfaction, for there before his eyes was the very thing he hoped to find; and it was precisely as he expected to find it.

Resting on her side in shallow water, her deck at a sharp angle as though she was careening,^[11] was the *Merry Hammer*. Mark recognized her at once. A dark painted sloop lay near her. The beach immediately in front of the two ships was a scene of the liveliest activity, swarming with men, many of whom were engaged in carrying bundles and piling them in a great heap above the high-water mark. Standing by the heap, in earnest conversation,

were two men whom Mark recognized instantly. One was Rochelle, and the other Benito Pallanca. At a short distance from them a number of men were building what appeared to be a fort from logs that others were dragging out of the forest, which echoed with the crisp thud of axes.

[11] In the days of wooden ships it was necessary from time to time to scrape off the barnacles and seaweed from that part which was submerged, as the trailing weeds greatly retarded the speed of the ship. For this purpose the ship was usually run ashore on a sandy beach, where, of course, she lay over on her side. This operation was called careening. After being scraped clean a coat of tar or tallow was applied. It was possible to careen a ship at sea by moving the guns or cargo over to one side, which naturally caused her to list, but this was not resorted to if the other method was possible, for it was attended by a certain amount of danger.

The counting of the men proved to be a task more difficult than Mark had expected, for they were all on the move, and there was a risk of counting the same men twice. Again, he had no means of knowing how many men were in the forest. In order to command a better view, he moved his position to some higher ground, and he was glad that he did so, for something that had previously been hidden from his eyes was now revealed. He saw for the first time that what had appeared to be a little bay was, in fact, the mouth of a river that wound a serpentine course back into the forest as far as his eyes could follow it. Moored to the nearest bank was a line of nine small boats, evidently all the boats belonging to the two ships; they were piled high with cargo—weapons, barrels of food, and gunpowder. In one of them a small gun had been mounted in the nose.

Time passed, but still Mark did not move, for he felt that such a golden opportunity should be made the most of. The total number of men was still not determined accurately, although from several counts he estimated that there were between three hundred and fifty and three hundred and seventy. It was the unknown number engaged in felling timber in the forest that made an accurate tally impossible, but he thought it unlikely that there were more than a score outside his field of vision. Once, a small party appeared out of the forest carrying a dead animal like a small hairy pig, and these, Mark reasoned, were hunters whose shot had first attracted his attention. Taking

them one and all, they were a rowdy lot of fellows, laughing and shouting as they worked, and indulging from time to time in rough horseplay.

Mark was just thinking of returning when a trumpet sounded and a change came over the scene. Most of the men stopped working, and, picking up baggage, muskets, and other equipment, began to assemble near the small boats; and a few minutes later Mark realized what was happening. He perceived that it was going to be his good fortune to witness the departure of the raiding party, bound for Puerto Novo on the other side of the isthmus.

At this he became mildly excited, for it would answer the most important question of all—how many men were actually going on the expedition. Peering through the undergrowth, he saw that if he could reach a knoll by the river bank, a short distance inland, he would have a really close view of the boats as they passed by on their journey. No sooner had he realized this than he was making his way towards it, keeping well inside the forest and picking his way with caution; not that there was much risk, for the noise made by the pirates effectually drowned all minor sounds.

A quarter of an hour's hard work saw him on the knoll, panting and perspiring, crouching at the foot of some tree-ferns overlooking the river. Blood dripped from a tear in his cheek, caused by a thorn, and flies buzzed about him in a cloud, but he paid no heed to either; he was much too engrossed in his task.

A wait of a few minutes and the boats came round the corner, escorted on either bank by a number of marching men. Mark counted those in the first boat, and memorized the number. He did the same with the next, and with each one in turn. There were no sailors in the last boat; rowed by eight men it was piled high with stores, and Mark, watching it closely, observed that there was something strange about it. A man stood in the stern, holding the tiller in his left hand, and swinging in his right an object that looked like a whip. Suddenly, with a start of horror, Mark understood. The rowers were slaves; he could see the ropes which bound them to their seats. Four were negroes, naked except for flimsy cotton drawers. They bent their backs to their task, not seeming to mind overmuch. Two were Carib Indians, their brown skins glistening. The other two were white men, and as they came abreast of him Mark looked at them curiously, wondering who they could be. His eyes settled on the nearer of the two, and remained fixed. He did not move, but his face went deathly pale. And thus he remained, staring, until the boat disappeared from sight round the next bend. Silence fell.

Slowly Mark rose to his feet and leaned, trembling, against the tree. The man at whom he had stared was old and bent. His head was bowed, and his

clothes were in rags. His hair and beard were matted. But there could be no mistake. It was his father.

HOW MARK WAS LOST IN THE FOREST

HOW MARK WAS LOST IN THE FOREST

How long Mark sat on the knoll he did not know. He lost all count of time. The shock of his discovery, coming as it did, so stunned him that for awhile he was quite incapable of thinking coherently; he could not even make up his mind how it affected him, or whether he was glad or sorry. In the absence of definite proof to the contrary, he realized now that in his heart he had held a lingering hope that his father might still be alive. Normally, the knowledge that this was indeed the case would have sent him wild with joy, but now, taking into consideration his father's awful condition, he did not know what to think. He remembered the old saying, 'While there's life there's hope,' but the chances of effecting a rescue seemed so remote as to be hardly worth considering.

What had happened was plain enough to see. Rochelle, for some reason or other, had not slain his father after all, but had held him captive; now, when he needed hands to man his boats, he had forced him to slavery. Whatever happened to Rochelle and his expedition, it seemed unlikely that his father would return, even if he survived the physical ordeal. Once Rochelle's purpose was served, and he had no further use for him, his fate was certain. If he fell into the hands of the Spaniards his end would be the same, for, as an Englishman, he could expect little mercy.

For the Captain to attack Rochelle's force, a force much greater than his own and armed to the teeth, would be an act of folly, even if he could overtake the raiding party, which was hardly likely considering the long start it would have. On the return journey, when the pirates were exhausted and reduced in numbers, it would be a different proposition—but would his father still be with them? In the event of trouble, the slaves would be among the first to be abandoned.

So pondered Mark as he sat on the knoll, his chin cupped in the palm of his right hand, eyes staring unseeingly at the turgid river. He started suddenly as he looked about him and became aware that the shadows were lengthening; the sun was already below the tree-tops to the west. Still in a daze, he began to retrace his steps, or so he thought, to the side of the creek. He would, he decided vaguely, try to ascertain how many men had been left behind to guard the base, and what they were doing. Afterwards it would be an easy matter to hurry back along the coast to the creek where the *Rose* lay at anchor.

Inside the dense forest the light had been wan enough even at midday, but now, with twilight falling, Mark was startled to discover that within the trees it was already quite dark. The silence was intense, and broken only by the noise he himself made, or furtive rustlings in the bushes the cause of which he did not linger to ascertain. Struggling on, tripping over fallen branches and striking his face against the dead limbs of trees, he pushed his way towards the place where he imagined the creek to be. Several times he scrambled up a ridge fully expecting to see the enemy camp from the top; but it was never there; only more forest. What little light there was faded rapidly.

It took him some time to realize that he must be going in the wrong direction, and, finally, that he was lost. At first he refused to believe it. It did not seem possible, although, admittedly, occupied as he was with his problem, he had not paid much attention to where he was going when he had first descended from the knoll. It did not seem necessary. And now he was lost. There was no longer any doubt about it. Reviling himself bitterly for his stupidity, he turned about and started to go back, but he very quickly realized, with a sinking feeling in his heart, that he had no idea of the direction he was facing.

By this time it was pitch black and he dare only move a step at a time, groping his way like a blind man with his hands held out in front of him. A choking grunt, followed by a sudden scuffle in the bushes, brought his heart into his mouth. Whipping out his sword, he held it in front of him, feeling singularly helpless. Never before had he experienced such utter darkness. For a few minutes he stood thus, expecting to be struck down by something which he could not see; but when the silence persisted he drew a deep breath of relief, and felt about for some place of refuge, for the folly of trying to proceed farther in such conditions was apparent. Chafe as he might at the delay, he realized that his wisest course would be to remain where he was until the dawn came.

After groping for some time, he found a tree with branches that came low down the trunk, and into this he climbed, and perching himself precariously on a branch, prepared to pass the night as well as he could.

It was an ordeal not lightly to be borne, but there was no alternative. Never could he remember time passing so slowly, not even the night in the prison cell at Port Royal. He dared not sleep, even if he had felt so inclined, for fear of falling. He could only sit still, hour after hour, staring into the inky blackness, starting occasionally as some soft-footed denizen of the forest passed near the tree to which he clung.

Nature had asserted itself, and he was actually dozing when a sound brought him to his senses with a violent start. He was not sure, but he thought that some one had shouted, and, his tired faculties almost forgetting the possible proximity of the enemy camp, he nearly answered back. Staring upwards, he saw that the canopy overhead had become a delicate grey tracery, and knew that the dawn had come at last. Before he could move, however, the silence was shattered by a sound so violent and so unexpected that he nearly fell from his perch in his agitation. It was a volley of musketry, intermingled with wild yells and shouts; and before he had fully recovered from this his ear-drums were quivering to the roar of heavy guns. So close did they seem that he might have been in the centre of the battle that was clearly raging not far away. As they roared, the flashes of the guns lit up the forest like distant lightning.

A cannon-ball crashing through the top of the tree in which he sat expedited his descent. For a moment or two he remained kneeling at the base of the tree, trying to recover his scattered wits; then, perceiving that there was just enough light for him to make some sort of progress, he began forcing his way through the jungle in the direction from which the uproar of battle was coming.

It did not take him long to reach it. A pale green light ahead proclaimed the edge of the forest, and scrambling feverishly towards it he peered eagerly through the screen of luxuriant ferns that skirted the trees.

He fully expected to see the *Rose* in the offing. He could think of no other possible cause to account for the attack but that the Captain, on his failure to return, had sailed along the coast looking for him and in so doing had stumbled on Rochelle's camp; whereupon, assuming naturally that he, Mark, was a prisoner in it, he had attacked it forthwith. This was the solution that had flashed through Mark's head during his rush to the edge of the forest, and he was so certain of his judgement—as, indeed, he had every reason to be—that it did not occur to him for a moment that he might be wrong.

His amazement, therefore, when he saw no fewer than five ships standing out of the pearly morning light of the open sea towards the creek was such as to hold him rooted to the ground. Rigid, one hand forcing back the fern fronds, his lips parted, he stared down at the scene from a slight elevation. A dozen small boats, packed with soldiers, were racing over the placid water to the spot where Rochelle's camp had been made. Other boats had already landed, and their occupants, even as he watched, stormed up to the half-erected palisades of the quickly constructed fort. A few fell back, writhing on the ground as the defenders' muskets roared. The rest went on.

From behind the rough-hewn logs came yells, groans, and screams. The other boats grounded on the beach, which was a-swarm with steel-clad soldiers, all converging on the half-finished fort.

The battle was soon over, for the surprise was complete, and the pirates, hopelessly outnumbered, had no chance. The noise of musketry died away. The clash of steel gave way to groans, then silence. The soldiers began to come out of the fort in ones and twos, plunging their swords into the sand to remove gory stains.

Mark sank down and tried to think, tried to grasp the fact that Spaniards—for he was in no doubt as to the nationality of the new-comers—had attacked Rochelle's base and wiped it out of existence. Whether or not a traitor had betrayed Rochelle made little difference; the fact remained that somehow the Spaniards had got wind of the expedition and had sent out a force to stop it. They had arrived too late to prevent Rochelle's departure, but they could attack and had massacred those who had been left on guard, which meant that they could now either await his return or follow him up and take him in the rear.

In the ordinary way Mark would have derived the greatest possible satisfaction from such a state of affairs, for Rochelle deserved the worst fate the Spaniards could devise for him—and they were notoriously clever at such things; but his father was with Rochelle, and the fate that overtook one was likely to overtake the other. If his position had been desperate before, it was now even worse.

For a little while longer Mark lingered. The fort, fired by the Spaniards, went up in a sheet of flame, a fitting pyre for those who lay within. The boats returned to their respective ships, and then came back again, loaded with provisions. The soldiers took their places in them, and in a few minutes the little fleet had disappeared from sight round the bend which Rochelle's boats had so lately passed. A number of Spaniards remained, and these set about establishing a camp on the site so recently occupied by the pirates.

Still holding his naked sword, Mark backed cautiously into the forest, and set off at a tangent that would enable him to strike the coast some distance below the creek. A dim green light now penetrated the tree-tops, and it was quite sufficient for him to find his way. Reaching the fringe of sand, he looked out cautiously to make sure that all was clear, and finding that it was, he set off at a steady trot towards the cove where the *Rose* lay at anchor.

He was deadly tired, but impelled by the vital knowledge he was anxious to impart to the Captain, he made good time. The last bend came into view

and he put on a spurt, the sand flying from under his feet. Subconsciously, he noted that the *Rose* must have moved her position or he would have been able to see her masts, but he did not stop to think about this. Taking a short cut through some palms that stood low down on the beach, he rounded the corner, and the cove lay before him. The cove, yes; but not the *Rose*. He stopped dead. There was no need for him to look twice. Had the ship been in the cove he could not have failed to see her. But she was not. The *Rose* had gone.

He passed his hand wearily over his face and leaned against a tree. What had happened? Where was the *Rose*? Why had she gone? He began to feel that the whole thing was a nightmare. He was still staring blankly at the blue water when a soft footfall behind him brought him round, sword at the engage. It was Pierro.

‘Where is the ship?’ asked Mark breathlessly.

‘She’*m* gone, Massa Mark,’ said the negro dispassionately.

‘I can see that,’ returned Mark irritably. ‘Where has she gone, and why?’

‘De Cap’n he slip out last night wen dose ole Spaniards come sailin’ along,’ Pierro told him.

Mark began to see daylight; he thought he could understand what had happened. The Captain had seen the Spanish ships searching the coast, probably looking for Rochelle’s base, and seeing that discovery was imminent, he had slipped away under cover of darkness.

‘De Cap’n, he daren’t stay,’ explained Pierro. ‘He go, but I stay around for you to come.’

Mark nodded and sat down at the foot of the tree. ‘Thanks, Pierro,’ he said. ‘Have you got a drink of water handy?’

UP THE FOREST TRAIL

CHAPTER X

UP THE FOREST TRAIL

FOR three days and nights, consumed with impatience, Mark kept almost incessant watch for the Captain's return, knowing only too well that with each passing hour the chances of rescuing his father became more and more remote. Twice he saw Spanish ships sailing along the coast as if on patrol, but of the *Rose* there was no sign, and the reason was not hard to find. In fairness to the crew, the Captain would not risk his ship against odds that were, on the face of it, hopeless. One ship he might have tackled, possibly two; but five. . . ? Mark could not blame him for that. It was not cowardice; it was plain common sense.

When the third day had passed and there was still no sign of the Captain, he was nearly sick with the suspense. Gloomy forebodings threw him into a state of wretchedness and despair. If the Captain had already fallen in with a Spaniard, or a hurricane—and it was the season of hurricanes—then he might never come at all. Even a few more days delay would be fatal. For, it must be understood, Mark was no longer thinking of himself. His thoughts were entirely of his father. He himself would have suffered the discomforts of the coast for a month if necessary—and discomforts there were, although the mosquitoes were the worst—without complaint.

He had, of course, told Pierro all about his discovery at the creek; of the pirates and of his father; but the negro, beyond a display of childlike surprise, offered no consolation. Whatever passed in his simple brain was not revealed. From time to time he fetched water, fruit, berries, and edible roots, to augment the biscuit and boucan which the Captain had left for him; for the rest, he padded up and down at Mark's heels like a well-trained hound.

On the evening of the third day, just as the sun was going down, a party of Spanish soldiers marched down the beach and surveyed the cove. Mark and Pierro took cover in the forest until they had gone.

'Presently we shall be discovered, and that will be the end,' declared Mark pessimistically, as he emerged from his hiding-place and threw himself down on the sand at the edge of the timber. 'Confound the Spaniards! It seems that they are likely to remain until those who have gone off on Rochelle's trail come back. If such is their intention, and the Captain stands off until the coast is clear, then we may be here a month. A pest on it! To find my father and lose him again is more than I can bear. By the way of

things, we are likely to stay here until we die of a fever, without striking a blow to save him. Well, I'll stay no longer. I'll follow those who have gone up the river until I come to my father, no matter where the path may end.'

Pierro evinced no surprise, pleasure, or displeasure at this decision. He got up and began assembling their few belongings.

'You must stay here,' said Mark firmly.

The remark seemed to rouse Pierro from his lethargy. His big eyes opened wide. 'Why, you ain't a-goin' up dat ole ribber all alone, Massa Mark?' he protested.

'I am,' declared Mark tersely. 'You must stay here in case the Captain comes. If he does, tell him all that I have told you about Rochelle, the Spaniards, and my father. He will understand then why I have gone. He may follow if he so decides, but he will be better advised, methinks, to remain here with the ship. If I find my father I shall endeavour to return to this spot.'

Pierro shook his head slowly but said nothing, for he saw that Mark's mind was made up, and as a slave he was in no position to question his master's decision.

'You wait till de morning?' he questioned.

'No, I'll start right now,' answered Mark, filling his pockets with biscuits. 'Since I cannot force a way through the forest, I must follow the coast until I come to the river, where I shall be able to follow in the tracks of those who have already gone. To-night I will walk to the creek, and there rest awhile, so that I shall be ready to start at the break of dawn.'

Little more was said. There were no preparations to make, so a few minutes later, after a word of farewell, he set off on his dangerous journey, a journey that no man who knew the Spanish Main would have undertaken willingly.

He reached the creek without incident while the night was yet young, and curled up between the sand dunes to snatch what sleep he could.

Dawn found him struggling through the forest on a course which would enable him to strike the river some distance above the Spanish camp, but such was the labour involved that it was after midday by the time he reached it. The short journey gave him his first taste of forest travel, and he decided that he would have no more of it if it could be avoided.

For the rest of the day he pushed on, walking along the sandy verge of the river when it was possible, and scrambling along the bank when it was not, all the time keeping a watchful eye open for Spaniards travelling either way. As darkness closed in he began to cast about for a place to sleep. A

hollow tree attracted his attention and he stooped to crawl into it, only to back away hurriedly as he found himself staring into a pair of green, unwinking eyes. To what creature they belonged he did not know; he never did know, for he hurried away and did not stop until he was some distance from the spot. In the end he crawled on to a fallen giant of the forest and lay at full length on the bole. It was a hard couch, but he was far too tired to be particular.

At the first flush of daylight he was off again, now following in the fairly well-beaten track of those who had preceded him. Apart from the track, signs of their passage were everywhere—wood ashes, gnawed bones, broken barrels, and the like. Shortly before noon a cloud of flies rose into the air from something that lay in the path; approaching it cautiously, he regarded with horror the dead, half-devoured body of an Indian. Keeping as far away from it as possible, he hurried past, and went on. In the afternoon he came to another body, this time that of a sailor, an Englishman judging by his clothes. It was swollen and distorted; what was left of the face was purple. An arrow protruding from between the shoulder blades told its own story. It reminded Mark that there were Indians in the forest, a fact that in his anxiety he had almost forgotten. He hurried on with as much speed as was compatible with caution.

Day followed day, and still he went on. He lost count of them. He seemed to have been travelling for weeks instead of days. The forest seemed eternal. It became a nightmare; a steaming mosquito-ridden monster that was slowly choking him to death. He was, in fact, nearly at the end of his endurance. The colour had gone out of his face; his eyes were bloodshot and his body emaciated. His clothes hung on him in ribbons. Yet the path went on and on, with corpses becoming more frequent, sometimes pirates and sometimes Spaniards.

He had eaten the last of his biscuits the day before, but he was not particularly hungry. He was, although he did not know it, living on his strength, and no one can do that for long without the effect being felt. He was conscious only of a great weariness, and realized the folly of starting on such a journey alone; yet, somehow, he did not regret it, consoling himself with the thought that he was daily drawing nearer to his father, for he knew that, having only himself to think of, he was certain to make faster time than a large body of men. Setting his teeth, he pushed on.

Towards evening he was brought to a halt by a most unexpected sound. It was a man's voice, singing, and he was soon aware that it was coming towards him; that is to say, the singer was coming down the river bank. Mark found a hiding-place in the jungle and waited, watching the path,

shivering at the eerie sound. No man in his right mind could sing in such a place, he thought, and in this he was very near the truth.

Presently the singer appeared, a bearded Spaniard, stark naked, either mad or raving in the delirium of a fever. His body was covered with countless insect bites and scratches where he had forced his way through the bushes.

From his place of concealment Mark watched him go past, eyes blazing, laughing and singing, and sometimes falling. He could do nothing for him, so as soon as he was out of sight he continued on his way.

Presently he came upon the man's shirt, lying where the crazy owner had flung it, and shortly afterwards, one by one, he passed other articles of clothing. At length he came upon a leather jacket, a steel cuirass and a morion, lying together. They gave him an idea. Picking them up, he hung them on the hilt of his sword, which he carried over his shoulder, and in this way he continued his journey.

That night he caught up with the Spaniards. He heard them long before he saw them. He was, in fact, just looking for a place in which to pass the night when, in the heavy silence, the sound of voices came floating down to him. In spite of his weariness, it brought him to the alert at once, for he knew that just ahead lay an obstacle through which he must pass in order to reach the pirates and his father—the Spanish camp. He had thought a lot about this, for he knew that sooner or later the problem was bound to arise, but there seemed to be no answer to it. If he was lucky, there was just a chance that he might be able to make a detour through the forest that would enable him to strike the river again above the Spaniards. The great difficulty, as he saw it, was this. Having had one experience of forest travel by night, he had no delusions about the danger of attempting such an operation in the darkness; yet it would be impossible to carry it out in daylight, for the Spaniards would be on the move, and as they were following the track, they would be able to travel faster than he, apart from which he would have a greater distance to cover. Yet, somehow or other, he had got to get above the Spaniards. It was of this problem that he was thinking when his eyes fell on the Spaniard's discarded equipment, and it occurred to him that it might offer a solution. If he could get it on, it might be possible for him to pass as a Spaniard, and so walk straight through the Spanish camp. It might even be possible, he reflected, to steal some food as he went through the Spanish lines. All of which was not unreasonable, if optimistic. Just how far his hopes were to mature he was soon to learn.

Moving with the greatest possible stealth, he soon came in sight of the camp. By this time it was pitch dark, but the camp was illuminated by half a

dozen roaring fires, which cast a ruddy glow over the scene, on the outskirts of which Mark halted to survey the situation. On the left lay the river, as black as a stream of ink, except for the area immediately opposite the fires, where it reflected the dancing flames. On the right rose the forest, equally black, mysterious, forbidding, menacing.

Setting down the equipment, he attempted to put his original plan into action, that of making a detour round the camp; but when at the end of half an hour he was no more than a score of paces from the path, he gave it up as hopeless; the jungle was so thick that an axe would have been needed to make a passage through, even in daylight. The river was equally out of the question, for he had seen too many snakes and alligators in it during his journey for him to attempt to swim. In any case, it was hardly likely that he would be able to pass through the firelit area without being seen by those on the bank. In these circumstances he was compelled to fall back on what seemed to be the only remaining chance, that of walking boldly through the camp.

With this object in view, wondering what he would have done without it, he proceeded to put on the equipment which the crazy Spaniard had so providentially discarded; and this, in the end, he managed to do, although not without difficulty, for he had never handled such things before and the fastenings were complicated. However, in the end he got them on well enough to suit his purpose, and thus accoutred, he breathed a prayer, and strode boldly forward towards the line of fires around which most of the Spaniards were seated, some resting, some eating, and others engaged in conversation.

He had already noted that there were six fires in all. He passed the first one without the slightest difficulty, although, naturally, he kept as far away from it as he conveniently could. The Spaniards did not even glance up, so, with his heart palpitating, he approached the second one. This time he was not quite so fortunate. One of the men looked up and called something to him, but he took no notice, and presently, glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the man who had spoken had resumed his occupation at the fire, whatever that may have been.

Mark's heart leapt, for so far it had been easier, much easier, than he expected it to be. With his confidence increasing, he walked on, and his manner was almost nonchalant as he sauntered past the third fire. Still his luck held. The men neither looked at him nor spoke to him. The same thing happened at the fourth and fifth fires. Only one remained. Just beyond it the path disappeared into the black towering arches of the forest.

This last fire was smaller than the rest, and it was placed, as Mark now observed for the first time, outside the entrance to a tent, the flaps of which were thrown back. As he drew level with the entrance he perceived five or six men seated round a small table just inside, evidently taking their evening meal. His heart gave a lurch as one of them glanced up and said something to the others. They all looked up. Mark walked on, although he dare not quicken his pace, for that might have looked suspicious. He was now so close to the forest that he determined, should an alarm be given, to make a dash for it, for it was obvious that he could do so with every hope of success.

He was past the fire now, every step he took lessening the glow it cast and bringing him nearer to the haven of refuge beyond. He dare not look back, but he could hear no sounds to indicate that he was being followed. A dozen more steps would do it. Exultantly he lengthened his stride. He was through! He had done it! In his elation he almost wished that he had had the courage to look for some food. And then, just as he was about to take the last pace that would have carried him to safety, half a dozen Spaniards, with an officer at their head, appeared in front of him, marching out of the forest. They met literally face to face.

Mark had no possible means of knowing that it was his disguise that was now his undoing; that the patrol was actually a search party that had been sent out to look for the delirious Spaniard. All he knew was that the Spaniards hailed him joyfully as soon as they saw him. One of them spoke. Beyond the fact that the words sounded like a name, they conveyed nothing to Mark, who knew nothing of the language. He made what he felt was a futile attempt to pass on, whereupon they closed in around him, and taking him by the arms, led him gently but firmly back into the camp. It was quite clear from their manner that they were under the impression that they were dealing with one of their own people, and it was not until the little party was opposite the fire near the tent, where one of the soldiers looked into Mark's face, that they realized their mistake. There was a shout of surprise and alarm. The grip on Mark's arms tightened. The men who were seated round the fires sprang to their feet, and came running up. There was a bustle inside the tent, and those who had been supping inside hurried out. One of them stepped forward and spoke sharply in a commanding voice. Mark was led forward, the soldiers closing in behind him. The morion was taken from his head. The Spanish captain gave another command, at which a number of the soldiers ran to their weapons and took stations round the outskirts of the camp as though in expectation of an attack. More fuel was thrown on the fire, which flickered up brightly, causing the tent, the guard, and the officers

to stand out in high relief. All eyes were on Mark. He felt his sword being removed.

Again the Spanish captain spoke, as though asking a question, and a man pushed his way to the front, so that he stood near to the prisoner.

‘You Englishman, yes?’ he asked, in fairly good English.

‘Yes, I am English,’ said Mark simply, feeling that he was dreaming, it was all so unreal. He felt—and was, in fact—desperately weak. The fire began to behave strangely. It was dancing about. The tent seemed to recede, and then come forward again. The crowding bearded faces became a blur that spun faster, faster, and ever faster. He felt the ground dropping from under his feet, and reached out weakly to save himself. Then everything went black.

For the first time in his life he fainted.

WHAT BEFELL MARK IN THE HANDS OF THE SPANIARDS

WHAT BEFELL MARK IN THE HANDS OF THE SPANIARDS

MARK'S collapse did not last more than a few minutes. He recovered consciousness with a great fear upon him, the fear of the unknown; for a second or two he could not make out where he was, or understand what had happened, but when he saw the Spanish captain bending over him with a silver goblet in his hand he remembered everything, and saw that he had been carried into the tent. Struggling into a sitting position, he drank avidly from the goblet which the captain offered him; the sweet Spanish wine it contained revived him, and, his brain clearing, he looked wonderingly at the Spaniards assembled about him. From what he had been told of Spaniards, he was fully prepared to be put to death on the spot, after having been made to suffer the most excruciating tortures; yet the Spanish officer's manner was kindly rather than the reverse.

In this Mark may have been unusually fortunate, for the Spaniards at this period of history were not, as a rule, humane men, particularly where their English enemies were concerned. It so happened, however, that Mark bore a striking resemblance to the eldest son of Don Hieronimo de Fuente—for that was the Spanish captain's name—who had recently died of fever at Trinidad, and his grief had moved him deeply. It may have been due to this fact that he had brought his youngest son, a lad of fourteen, with him on the expedition, for he could not bear to let him out of his sight. It was this lad, whose name was Alfonso, who now brought Mark some nuts and raisins, which only served to increase his astonishment. Nevertheless, he ate them ravenously. When it was obvious that he had recovered completely from his faint, he was invited to sit in a camp chair, where the Spanish officers gathered before him, and the soldier who had previously acted as interpreter addressed him.

'Your name, señor?' he asked.

'Mark Lawson.'

Don Hieronimo started as he caught the words. 'Lawson . . . Lawson,' he ejaculated. He spoke swiftly to the interpreter in his own language. When he had finished the interpreter again turned to Mark.

'His Excellency desires to know if by any chance you are related to a gentleman who commands a ship named *Silver Spray*,' he inquired.

' 'Twas my father,' replied Mark briefly.

The interpreter repeated the information for the captain's benefit, and here again Mark was lucky, for some years previously his father, coming upon a Spanish ship that had been dismasted by a storm, with the result that the crew were in evil case for want of water, had given them a supply sufficient to take them to the nearest land. Whether or not it is fair to regard such incidents as luck is open to question; it may be that they are part of a scheme of things beyond the ken of mere mortals. Be that as it may, the fact remained that Don Hieronimo had been one of those on board the damaged ship, and having the quality of gratitude in his heart, did not forget the occasion. Thus it was that his interest in Mark, from being mildly indifferent, now became personal, and in this peculiar way Colonel Lawson reaped the benefit of his kindly action.

The next question asked by the interpreter was, naturally, how Mark came to be in such a place, at such a time, and in such a condition. For what purpose had he entered the Spanish encampment?

Mark had nothing to conceal. There was no need for him to attempt evasion. He told his story simply, briefly, and truthfully, making no secret of his hatred of Butcher Rochelle, whose reputation was as well known to the Spaniards as the British. He made it clear that his sole object in coming so far up the river had been in the wild hope of rescuing his father. The story was repeated word for word by the interpreter to the Spaniards, who heard him out in silence. When it came to an end there was a mutter of excited conversation.

Don Hieronimo spoke to the interpreter, who turned again to Mark.

'His Excellency desires you to understand that he is in pursuit of the buccaneers, many of whom are of your country. If they are taken, they will, of course, be put to death.'

'They are as much my enemies as yours,' observed Mark. 'Rochelle is the enemy of mankind, and every honest blade, no matter of what nation, should be turned against him.'

Don Hieronimo nodded approvingly as this statement was repeated to him, and then, turning back to his companions, he engaged them at some length in conversation. Mark did not understand what was being said, but it was plain from the actions of the Spaniards that the matter in debate was what should be done with him. At the end the interpreter passed on the decision, which was that for the present he would have to remain with them, for the pirates were reckoned to be not more than a day's march ahead; if he cared to give his parole that he would not attempt to escape, he would not be kept under guard, but would be allowed to retain his sword and freedom.

Mark could have asked for nothing better. He was far more anxious to go on than go back, and in the company of the Spaniards the journey would be tolerably comfortable; at least he would suffer no more distress from want of food. He therefore accepted Don Hieronimo's terms without hesitation; indeed, a new hope had been born in his heart.

His sword was given back to him; food was brought and set on the table, for his famished condition had not passed unnoticed, and forthwith he made the biggest meal of his life, the Spaniards smiling at his ravenous appetite. Don Hieronimo's son, Alfonso, waited on him at table with his own hands, smiling at Mark shyly with his big dark eyes.

When he could eat no more Mark rose and thanked the Spaniards courteously for their charitable hospitality, stating his opinion that such actions did far more in the cause of peace than all the battles that had been fought on land or sea. This done, he begged permission to retire, for, partly as a result of the heavy meal he had made, he was so tired that he swayed on his feet. Only with the greatest difficulty could he keep his eyes open.

Don Hieronimo saw his condition, and at a word from him Alfonso took Mark by the arm and led him to an annexe of the tent, where the officers' baggage was piled. A rug was spread out on the ground. Mark curled himself on it like a dog, and was asleep the moment his head touched the pack which Alfonso had arranged as a pillow.

No sooner had he closed his eyes—or so it seemed to him—than he plunged into a most fearful nightmare. The noise was appalling; musket shots and the clash of steel punctuated with furious shouts. For a moment or two he stirred uneasily in his sleep, trying to banish the awful noise from his ears; then, suddenly, he awoke. Raising himself on his elbow, he rested thus, struggling to bring his sleep-soaked faculties to full consciousness. The clamour still rang in his ears. Looking up, he saw that the roof of the tent was grey, and knew that the dawn had broken. The noise outside rose to a ghastly pandemonium, and with a rush of understanding he realized that the camp had been attacked. By whom?

Snatching up his sword, he flung back the flaps of the tent and ran into the open, staring wildly to right and left. A dreadful spectacle met his eyes. The ground immediately around the camp fires was a shambles of dead and dying Spaniards, many lying stretched out where they had slept as though they had been taken completely by surprise by the pirates, who were now swarming all over the camp. In one or two places small, isolated parties of half-dressed Spaniards, who apparently had not even had time to put on their steel caps and breastplates, were making a last stand against bands of pirates

who surrounded them like ravening wolves, shouting and cursing like madmen.

So much Mark saw at a glance while he stood hesitating, unable to make up his mind what he ought to do. Being on the outskirts of the camp, he could, he thought, slip away, yet he could not bring himself to desert his benefactors in their unhappy extremity.

He saw Rochelle, chest bare, eyes blazing, mouth open, roaring like a wild beast, leading an assault on the Spanish officers' tent, at the entrance of which Don Hieronimo and his staff, with Alfonso among them, were doing what they could to hold their own.

Mark hesitated no longer; the lust of battle seized him, and setting his teeth, he ran towards the side of the tent where the press was thinnest. A pirate, a huge red-headed man with a pock-marked face, saw him coming, and slashed at him with a cutlass, but he ducked, and as the blade swished over his head the point of his sword took the man in the throat. With a choking cry the pirate dropped his cutlass and staggered back, clutching at the wound. Mark did not wait to see what became of him. Forcing his way with difficulty to Alfonso's side, he turned to face the pirates just in time to thrust his sword into a hand that was levelling a pistol. Alfonso saw him and cried out a word that sounded like a greeting; Mark saw that his face was pale but determined, and his heart warmed to the lad. But it was no time for talking. Cut and thrust, thrust and cut, steel clashed against steel with all the other dreadful sounds of battle. A musket roared and a Spanish officer who had been fighting at Don Hieronimo's left hand went down, shot through the head. Mark stepped into his place, and lunging low, ran his blade through the man who had fired the shot. The fight went on.

Mark knew that he was fighting his last battle. He could find no possible reason to think otherwise. The odds were too great, and were, in fact, becoming greater every minute as the outlying Spaniards were killed, and the pirates who had cut them down reinforced those at the entrance to the tent. Bodies lay everywhere, and Mark found it difficult to move his feet without stumbling over them. He had only one thought, which was to kill as many pirates as he could before he himself was killed.

A whirling cutlass caught his slender sword across the middle and snapped it like a carrot. He hurled the useless hilt into the face of the man who had aimed the blow, and then dropped to his knees, looking desperately for a fallen weapon. The only one within reach was a dagger. He snatched it up, but before he could get properly to his feet again he was flung down by a sudden rush from behind. At the same moment there was a shrill yell of

warning, and turning, he saw the tent falling towards him as a pirate, more cunning than the rest, slashed through the cords that held it up.

Mark uttered a cry to warn Don Hieronimo of what was happening, but it was cut short. He flung up his arms to shield himself from the mass of canvas, forgetting the heavy centre pole that was within it. His hands disappeared into the yielding fabric, but the pole struck him on the forehead, and the world seemed to explode in a blaze of fiery stars. He went down like a log.

It happened, however, that the blow was only a glancing one, for which reason he was only temporarily stunned, but by the time he had recovered his senses the scene had entirely changed; not that he realized this immediately. Raising himself slightly on his elbow, he blinked stupidly at the little pool of blood that had formed where his head had been. Then he saw other, larger, bloodstains, and the bodies of those who lay in them.

He next became aware that a voice was speaking, a deep, booming voice, and recognized it as Rochelle's, from which he gathered that the battle was over. Lifting up his aching head, this is what he saw. A dozen paces away, seated on a barrel, a blood-stained cutlass across his knees, was Rochelle. Pallanca stood at his elbow. In front of them, regarding the pirates with haughty disdain, were Don Hieronimo and Alfonso, presumably the only survivors of the Spanish side. Forming a rough circle round these central figures were the pirates, some engaged in tying up their wounds, others resting on their weapons, but all watching the drama that was being enacted. Mark himself lay inside this circle, where apparently he had been thrown, from which he gathered that it was realized that he was still alive, although, as all eyes were on the unfortunate Spaniards, no one, as far as he could judge, had noticed that he had recovered consciousness. The roughly shod feet of the nearest pirates were five or six paces away.

Mark turned his attention to Rochelle, who was addressing the two Spaniards in sneering tones.

'Trying to make us believe you can't talk our lingo, eh?' he murmured, with a leer at his assembled company, as though proud of his wit.

Don Hieronimo shook his head. '*No comprendo,*' he said quietly.

'No comprendo, don't you, you lying scum,' snarled Rochelle. 'Why, what are you talking now if it ain't English?'

Don Hieronimo merely shook his head. It was plain to any one that he did not understand what Rochelle had said.

'So you won't talk, won't you, you stinking Spaniard,' grated Rochelle. 'Then by thunder I'll find a way to make you, for they don't call me the

Butcher for nothing, not likely they don't.'

With the slow deliberation of a great bear he stood up, and took a pistol from the hands of a pirate standing near him. Slowly, with his chin thrust forward and his thick lips parted in a dreadful leer, he advanced towards the Spaniards. A hush fell. Neither Don Hieronimo nor his son moved. They regarded the brute in front of them with a calm that was near to contempt. Mark watched, spellbound with horror, his heart pounding under his ribs. He knew that something awful was about to happen, but he could not tear his eyes away. He held his breath as Rochelle levelled the pistol. A tongue of flame spurted from the muzzle. It seemed to end at Alfonso's chest.

For an instant the young Spaniard swayed, his hands clutching vainly in front of him. Then he crashed face downward on the ground.

The silence was broken by Rochelle's bellow of laughter as he flung the pistol at the body of the fallen boy. Peal after peal of the terrible laughter poured from his mighty lungs.

In spite of the heat, Mark turned as cold as ice. He felt that he was going to be sick, but he could not look away from Don Hieronimo's face. The anguish on it would have moved any one to pity—except the inhuman monster who had struck the blow.

'Will that make you open your mouth?' he roared.

Don Hieronimo looked at Rochelle with eyes that held neither hate nor fear, only unspeakable horror and agony. His face was ashen.

Mark felt something inside him begin to stir, something that made him tremble in every limb. He seemed to have difficulty in getting his breath. His eyes blazed through half-closed lids as they rested on the object of his hatred, still standing before the stricken Spanish officer. His fingers, the knuckles gleaming whitely, closed over something he was holding in his hand, and looking down he saw that it was the dagger which he had picked up at the last moment of the battle. A fierce exultation ran through him, a wonderful sense of power, filling him with a strength that seemed all-powerful. It was as if something inside him was straining to be unleashed. He looked again at Rochelle. This was his chance. The pirate was at his mercy. He would kill him with no more compunction than he would slay a mosquito. Don Hieronimo should at least have the satisfaction of revenge before he died.

Mark braced himself for the spring, every nerve in his body quivering like a bow-string under tension. Then, like an arrow, he sped across the short distance that separated him from the Butcher.

There was a shout of warning from the pirates. Rochelle whirled round, but he was too late. Mark's arm swept through the air, the sunlight flashing on the gleaming steel. The point, impelled by every ounce of pent-up strength in his body, caught Rochelle fairly over the heart. The pirate staggered backwards under the force of the blow; but he did not fall. A shout of laughter broke from his lips. Mark stared at him stupidly. He looked down at the dagger in his hand, his jaw sagging with surprise and consternation. Then he looked back at the pirate who was still laughing at his discomfiture, and understood. Rochelle wore a shirt of chain-mail under his silken vest.

Mark drew a deep breath of impotent fury; his lips parted, showing his white teeth, and he sprang again, but the butt end of a musket crashed down on his arm; the dagger dropped from his nerveless fingers and a score of rough hands seized him. He sank down, almost swooning from the pain of the blow. He felt no fear; only an overwhelming sense of bitter disappointment.

Another shout made him look up and he saw something that sent his hopes blazing up again. Don Hieronimo, with a convulsive effort, had flung his guards aside, and had leapt at Rochelle. His clutching hands found the pirate's throat, but before they could close round it Pallanca had stepped forward, and whipping out a pistol clapped it to the Spaniard's head. The weapon roared, and Don Hieronimo's body fell quivering across that of his son.

Mark's lips moved, his eyes, blazing with inward fire, glaring into Rochelle's. 'You foul, loathsome beast,' he choked. 'You villain! The day will come when you will remember this hour.' His voice rose to a high falsetto. 'You monster! You unspeakable wretch! You . . . you . . .' A hand closed over his mouth. Others dragged him to his feet. Rochelle walked slowly towards him. The pirates closed in, narrowing the circle.

Mark faced his captor with unutterable contempt.

'English, eh, by thunder?' roared Rochelle. 'Hear that, boys? He's English. The dirty traitor. Now we know who set the Dons on our track. It was 'im. That's who done it. Sink me, if I don't tear his tongue out with my own hands. I've made some men die in my time, as none can deny, but watch this one go. Those of you who see Rochelle's way with traitors will remember it, I'll warrant. Bring me a piece of cord, boys, and a bit of wood, and watch his eyes pop out.'

Mark was beyond feeling either pain or fear. He was praying, praying as he had never prayed before, for just one more hour of life and freedom so

that he might make one more attempt to do what he had already tried to do, and failed.

A pirate handed Rochelle a piece of raw-hide thong, and a short length of wood. With a cold smile playing about his lips Rochelle adjusted the cord round Mark's forehead and, inserting the piece of wood, began to twist it like a tourniquet. The thong tightened.

Mark sneered in the pirate's face. 'Twist, curse you, twist,' he ground out through his clenched teeth. 'A lot I care for you, or all that you can do. Four hundred of you, and not a man amongst you. You craven cowards. You _____,'

A hand struck him across the mouth, and a trickle of blood ran down his chin from his lips. Then such a pain as he could not have imagined shot through his head, and the scene rocked before his eyes.

Rochelle loosened the cord a little. 'How do you like that?' he grinned.

'Still up to your old tricks, Rochelle?' said a quiet voice near at hand.

In the sudden hush which followed his words Rochelle loosened the cord and spun round.

A tall, elegant figure pushed his way through the pirates and stood between Rochelle and his captive, his arms folded across his breast.

Mark stared unbelievably.

It was Captain Champion.

CAPTAIN CHAMPION SPEAKS

CAPTAIN CHAMPION SPEAKS

AGAIN MARK was conscious of a strange sense of unreality. Once more he was living in a dream. Was the Captain standing there in the flesh, or would he presently fade into the seething human background and disappear? Perhaps his eyes were playing him tricks. Or maybe he had a touch of fever. Had the pain of the torture made him unconscious? Was that the answer? His thoughts were interrupted, and he shrank back instinctively as Rochelle let out a bellow of amazement.

‘How in thunder did you get here?’ he roared.

‘Dropped out of the sky, mayhap,’ smiled the Captain pleasantly.

Rochelle stared at him; then he looked past him over his shoulder, his eyes roving along the edge of the forest, and up and down the river. ‘Are ye here alone?’ he asked in a curious tone of voice.

The Captain gave question for question. ‘Do ye think I should be such a fool to step into a lion’s den if I had no lads handy to pull me out?’ he asked with a whimsical smile.

‘Where are they?’ asked Rochelle suspiciously.

‘In the forest, where else?’

‘Why have you come here?’ was Rochelle’s next question, his eyes narrowing as they rested on the neat figure in front of him.

‘Come, I like that,’ laughed the Captain. ‘Did you not invite me to join you?’

‘Invite ye?’ Rochelle was plainly bewildered.

‘So I understood at Tortuga, although, forsooth, our manners on that occasion were not those of comrades, I must confess. But I had other fish to fry, so I could not tarry to explain. You’ll forgive my discourtesy, I trust? Having fried my fish, along I came pell-mell to join in the fun. By the by, loose the boy; he seems to have had enough.’

‘No, by thunder,’ swore Rochelle. ‘Sink me! You’ve got a nerve.’

‘He is a friend of mine,’ the Captain pointed out.

‘Friend or not, the little whelp tried to stab me.’

The Captain laughed shortly. ‘Do ye wonder at it, if that is how ye treat him. He was always a lad of mettle, or, forsooth, I should not be wasting my breath arguing about him.’

‘Friend or enemy, I’ll slit his throat, the cub,’ snarled Rochelle.

The Captain raised his eyebrows in affected surprise. ‘Why, because he’s handy with a knife? Oddsfish, man, but you’re so handy with a blade yourself that I’d ha’ thought he would have been a lad after your own heart. Would ye have a boy a snivelling craven? Had he been your own lad he could not have acted brisker, judging by your account. We’ll need every man who can hold a sword before we’re back on the coast, if I know anything of the Spaniards. Come, let him loose.’

‘He betrayed us to the Spaniards, I tell ye,’ protested Rochelle, whose wits were struggling to keep pace with the situation.

‘Tush, man,’ exclaimed the Captain lightly. ‘He lost his way in the forest, where, unless I am mistook, he fell in with the Dons and was taken prisoner.’

‘Then why did he fight against us?’ challenged the pirate.

‘He’ll explain his actions to me,’ declared the Captain, scowling at Mark. ‘If he can’t, well, I’ve a way with cheeky lads as well as you. And as for betraying you, why, I have news for you that will make your ears tingle, I’ll warrant, so let us not stand wrangling here like a pair of Frenchies.’ The Captain turned aside as though the matter was as good as settled. ‘Give him a drink, one of you,’ he told the pirates. ‘He looks as though he could do with one.’

Rochelle did not move. ‘What is this news ye talk of so glibly?’ he asked sullenly.

‘Do ye know what has happened at the creek?’

‘How in thunder should I know? Do ye take me for a wizard?’ demanded Rochelle.

‘I should ha’ thought that a man with *your* head on his shoulders would have left a scout or two behind, to keep an eye on things. But there, I make no doubt that the best of us can boggle over a little thing like that,’ remarked the Captain, with subtle flattery which served its purpose.

At a word from Rochelle Mark was released. Some one handed him a pannikin of coffee.

The Captain paid no further attention to him, as though the matter was not worth his notice. ‘Our base is wiped out, Rochelle,’ he said.

‘*Our* base! Shiver my sides, but you take some airs on yourself,’ growled Rochelle. ‘I reckon you mean *my* base.’

‘Our base, surely. Or maybe you don’t want my brisk lads, after all? Why do you think I’ve come all this way? To stretch my legs? Stap me! I

could find a better way of doing that than sweating through this pestilent jungle. Listen! This was the way of it, for 'tis time you knew it. Hearing that you had started, I pressed on after you, thinking that two combined forces were better than one. Upon my life, what do I find when I get to Chagraw Creek? Your camp burnt out; your men all cut to ribbons, and the Spaniards there in force with five big ships lying off, waiting like terriers outside a rat-hole for you to come back.'

Rochelle broke into a stream of curses. He pointed an accusing finger at Mark, spitting obscene oaths. ' 'Twas he who betrayed us, blister his hide!' he snarled. 'I'll tear the whelp's throat——'

'Wait, man, wait,' interrupted the Captain impatiently. 'Hear me out, or we are like to stand here arguing till the Dons come upon us. I learned the truth from a Spanish prisoner I took, a poor crazy fool who, in a fever, had thrown his clothes away and was wandering naked in the forest like a man demented. With a little care I brought him to his senses, after which I invited him to speak—which he did, you need make no doubt. You wagged your tongue too much in Tortuga, Rochelle—unless 'twas you, Pallanca. No matter. A Spanish spy, perceiving what was afoot, joined up with you, and sent a message to Havana, with what effect I have already told you. Have ye a renegade Spaniard here among you named Juan de Soto? Do ye know such a fellow?'

'Ay, I do that,' cried Rochelle, looking round fiercely. 'Where is he?'

'Well might you ask,' sneered the Captain. 'Gone, I'll be bound, now his work is done.'

There was a stir in the ranks of the pirates, and some low muttering.

'Where is he?' roared Rochelle. 'Bring the white-livered hound to me. I'll have his heart out.'

There was more muttering.

'Sink you for a pack of dumb fools,' yelled Rochelle, foam flecking his lips. 'Answer my question. Where is he?'

'He ain't here,' muttered an old man nervously. 'He ain't been seen nor heard of for days, not since Job Hyde got shot through with an arrow.'

The Captain nodded. ' 'Tis not to be wondered at,' he murmured. 'Well, he was the man who betrayed you, Rochelle. As I say, he sent word to Havana of what was in the wind, so that now you have no ship or anything else at the creek. Doubtless they are making ready to receive us at Puerto Novo, as well. If the one place was warned that we had landed on the Main, 'tis reasonable to suppose that all were warned.'

Rochelle choked back his wrath. 'What's to be done?' he asked, unconsciously yielding to the Captain's stronger personality. 'If we can't go forward and we can't go back, what's to be done, I say?'

'Having no mind to spend the rest of my days in this steam-rotted forest, I propose to go forward,' declared the Captain. 'We've got to fight, it seems, whichever way we go, so we may as well fight where, if we win, we are likely to get something for our pains. To Puerto Novo, say I. With my three-score brisk lads we will yet turn the tables on the Dons.'

'That's well spoke,' declared Rochelle. 'Sink the Spaniards for a lot of devil's spawn—they shall pay for this. I'll cut the heart out of every man jack I take, sink me if I won't!'

'If that's settled, let us see about taking them,' suggested the Captain placidly. 'Where is your main camp? This does not look like it.'

'No, this was the Spaniards', laughed Rochelle. 'Ours is a mile up the river.'

'Good! I'll fetch my lads and join ye in half an hour,' nodded the Captain. He turned towards the forest and cupped his hands around his mouth. 'Ho, there, Pierro!' he called loudly.

To Mark's surprise and joy Pierro ran out from the trees. He carried a naked cutlass in his right hand. The Captain halted him.

'Tell the lads to make ready; and stir yourself,' he called.

The negro stood hesitating.

The Captain turned to Rochelle. 'Curse the fellow for a dolt,' he snapped. 'I'd better go myself. The only way to give orders is to give them yourself, methinks; then there is no mistake.' He turned to Mark. 'Here, you, my lad, you'd better come with me,' he said tersely. 'Off you go.' He turned back to Rochelle. 'I'll see ye anon,' he said shortly, and followed Mark down the path without a single backward glance.

Not until they were out of sight round a bend in the track, where Pierro joined them, did Mark speak.

'By my faith, John, but you came in the nick of time,' he said seriously. 'They were about to put me to the torture.'

'So I perceived,' replied the Captain. 'That was why I had to alter my plans and do some sharp thinking, although I had no mind to step into that pack of jackals, you may be sure.'

'But Rochelle would hardly dare to lay hands on your person with the rest of our lads so handy,' said Mark confidently.

‘So handy? What do ye call handy?’ asked the Captain, throwing a sidelong glance at Mark.

‘Well . . . the lads . . . where are they?’ asked Mark wonderingly.

‘Where indeed?’ smiled the Captain.

‘But are they not here?’ gasped Mark.

‘Do ye see any?’ queried the Captain lightly.

‘But you . . . you said they were in the forest,’ stammered Mark.

‘Indeed I did, and ’tis true enough, upon my honour,’ returned the Captain. ‘I did not think it politic, though, to mention that they were fifty miles away, or more.’

Mark stopped dead in his tracks. ‘You came into that murder-den—alone?’

‘Faith, an’ I had to, since there was no one to come with me, only Pierro, and him I had to leave behind to warn Dan in case my plan miscarried.’

‘Why in heaven’s name did you take such a ghastly risk?’

‘I could hardly stand by and watch them woodle you, could I, particularly after the trouble I had been to, following you hot-foot for days?’

Mark’s eyes were moist as he looked at the Captain. ‘That was a noble thing to do,’ he muttered huskily. ‘The cards were all in Rochelle’s favour, and he would have cut you down on the instant had he but known the truth.’

‘Not all, Mark lad,’ said the Captain lightly. ‘I had one card, one I always carry; one which, played at the right moment, can be the best in the whole pack. ’Tis called bluff.’

‘You played it brilliantly,’ nodded Mark. ‘I myself had never a suspicion of the truth.’

‘’Twas as well, perhaps, or your anxiety might have betrayed us,’ observed the Captain.

‘And where are we going now?’ asked Mark.

‘Why, back to the coast, where else, as fast as our legs will carry us, before Rochelle discovers my duplicity.’

Mark shook his head. ‘Think me not ungrateful, John,’ he said in a voice that shook, ‘but I set out to find my father, and find him I will. If he is still in Rochelle’s camp, then I must go back, but I implore you go on.’

The Captain drew a deep breath. His eyes wandered to the forest on the left of the path. ‘Let us find a place to rest awhile and talk this matter over,’ he said quietly.

DIVERS EXPLANATIONS

CHAPTER XIII

DIVERS EXPLANATIONS

WADING knee deep in tropical ferns, orchids, and trailing lianas, they succeeded in finding a tiny open space amongst the crowding tree-trunks, about a dozen yards from the track and well shielded from it by the riotous undergrowth. Mark and the Captain squatted down, while Pierro remained standing, his black body appearing to merge into the tree against which he leaned, while he kept watch on the steaming track down which they had come.

‘Methinks ye must have had an engaging trip,’ murmured the Captain to Mark. ‘Did Rochelle speak truth when he said you fought on the side of the Spaniards? There was an honest ring in his voice for once, though it seemed passing strange that you should fight for the Dons, and I can think of no reason for it whatever.’

‘Yet it was true,’ admitted Mark. ‘And when I tell you how it came about you will agree in full measure, I think, that I could not have acted otherwise.’ And forthwith he related his adventures from the time he had gone ashore at the cove for the simple purpose of stretching his legs.

‘Oddsfish, ye stretched your legs to greater length than ye expected,’ announced the Captain when he had finished.

‘How did you come to leave the cove, and arrive so timely in this remote place?’ asked Mark. ‘Never in my life was friend more welcome—and unexpected—than when you stepped out of the forest.’

‘’Tis easily explained,’ the Captain told him. ‘Naturally, when Dan went ashore for water, and you with him, I posted a watch in the foretop to keep an eye open for the Indians who are known to frequent these parts; and ’twas just as well, for towards evening he spied a fleet of Spanish ships a-sailing down the coast. Had the men Rochelle left on guard the wit to keep watch, they would have seen them, too, but it seems that they did not. It threw us into something of a confusion, but it happened that darkness fell before the Dons were abreast of our cove. ’Twould have been madness to fight them all, so before the moon rose we manned the boats and towed the *Rose* round the point, where, catching a slant of wind, we hoisted sail and away. Your man Pierro would not come, so, as you know, I left him ashore with some provisions and instructions to inform you of what had befallen. I could not understand your actions, and I near fell into a fever of suspense from watching for you to come back; but, as you may gather, I dare not hazard the

whole ship's company for one man even though 'twere you. So off we went. Naturally, knowing nothing of Rochelle's men at Chagraw Creek, I expected the Dons to sail right on, when 'twas my intention to return and pick you up; but when they anchored in the creek I was at my wit's end to know what to do. For three days I waited, thinking mayhap that they were only a-watering, and expecting them hourly to depart. But at the end of that time, seeing that they meant to tarry, I dropped a boat and crept along the coast to see if I could find you. Had I been a few hours earlier I should have caught you, for when I landed at the cove, where I found Pierro, you had not long departed, although you had gone too far for me to overtake you. Pierro told me of the happenings at the creek, which took me aback, as you may imagine. 'Twas hard to know what to do for the best, but in the end I sent the boat back to the *Rose* with a message to Dan to keep clear of the creek, and watch for us lower down the coast; then, not liking the thought of you wandering alone in the forest, I set off after you, bringing Pierro with me. Or rather, since he would not stay behind, he came with me.

'On my way up the river I met a demented Spaniard, as you heard me tell Rochelle, and from him I learned several things. After the poor wretched fellow had died I hurried on, my steps being hastened by the sound of a battle raging somewhere ahead of me. I reached it too late to take part in it, but arrived in time to see Rochelle at his dastardly practices. Even so, I did not stir, thinking mayhap to rescue you after the business had subsided, but when I saw Rochelle make ready to torture you, I had no choice but to play the one card left in my hand—with what result you know. 'Twas not difficult to hoodwink the dull-witted fellow; nevertheless, the sooner we place a distance between ourselves and him the sooner I shall breathe freely, for should he learn how he has been tricked, and get us in his power, we should not walk out of his camp again so easily. I——'

The Captain broke off short and started up as Pierro uttered a soft warning hiss. Turning, the negro made a grimace and held up one finger.

'He means that some one is coming, one only,' whispered Mark in the Captain's ear, as they both peered through the palm fronds to watch the track.

Pierro proved to be right, for presently a man appeared in the path, although they heard his clumsy footsteps and laboured breathing before they saw him. He was old, grey-bearded, and so mired from head to foot with travel that it was impossible even to guess his nationality, although it was clear that he was a white man. He ran with a staggering gait, like one who is near the end of his endurance, but as he ran he sought eagerly along the river bank as though he expected to find something, stopping at brief intervals to

stare wildly this way and that, particularly up the path along which he had come, as though he feared pursuit.

Almost immediately opposite the place where the three pairs of eyes were watching him curiously, he halted and, uttering a little cry, plunged into the bushes that fringed the sullen river.

‘He’s crazed, methinks,’ whispered Mark in the Captain’s ear.

‘Ssh!’ was the only answer he got.

A moment later the man reappeared, grunting with exertion and satisfaction as he dragged a small bundle, which looked like a corded sack, with him. He had almost reached the path again when he stopped, tense, head on one side, listening intently.

The watchers soon heard the sounds that had alarmed him. From some distance up the track came voices and crashing footsteps. Shortly afterwards three men appeared, hurrying down the path. They were clearly pirates, and carried muskets over their shoulders or under their arms. They did not stop, but went right on down the path.

Long before they had appeared the old man had vanished from sight into the bushes where he had found the sack, so that as the pirates passed the spot there was nothing to show that the man whom they appeared to be seeking lay almost within reach.

Mark quivered with excitement as this little drama was enacted before their eyes, realizing that neither the pirates nor the fugitive could have imagined for a moment that they were being watched. The minutes passed, and neither the old man nor the pirates reappeared, so that Mark, staring at the bushes in which the fugitive lay, found it hard to believe that the man was still there, so still and silent did he lie.

After what seemed a long wait, but which may have been not more than a quarter of an hour, the pirates reappeared, panting and grumbling loudly amongst themselves.

‘I tell ye he ain’t come this way, or we’d a-seen ’im,’ stated one. ‘A pest on the old fool.’

‘Maybe the Injuns got ’im,’ suggested another.

‘Aye, that’s what we’ll have to tell Rochelle, or he’s like to play havoc. It don’t matter nohow; the old fool ain’t got no chance of getting to the anchorage, and if he does the Dons’ll nab him, if what Champion says is true. Funny we didn’t see no signs of Champion’s men, come to think of it ...’

Still talking, the pirates disappeared up the path towards Rochelle's camp.

Another five minutes elapsed, and then the bushes opposite the three watchers were parted, and the old man, with infinite caution, crept out, his eyes staring apprehensively up the track.

Suddenly Mark felt the Captain's hand close on his arm in a vice-like grip. He heard him catch his breath sharply. Then, 'Ben!' he cried. 'Ben Read! Don't run, Ben.'

The old man's consternation was pitiful to behold. He dropped his burden and fell on his knees, holding up his arms in an attitude either of prayer or horror—it was impossible to say which—while words tumbled incoherently from his lips.

'It's all right, Ben,' called the Captain again. 'It's Captain Champion calling ye—here, in the bushes. Put your helm over and join us.'

The old man's face lit up with an amazing radiance, and he uttered a cry of joy. In an instant he was fighting his way through the bushes towards the spot where the others were waiting.

'God be praised, Captain Champion!' he cried in a trembling voice. 'I'll go on my knees every night—'

'Ssh! man, not so loud,' muttered the Captain tersely. 'The trees have ears in this accursed forest. Come on, you're amongst friends. This is Mark Lawson; you'll remember him, no doubt?'

'Ay, I mind him,' said the old man, gazing at Mark with streaming eyes.

Mark remembered vaguely seeing the man before, but for the moment he could not recall where.

'Come now, take your time, and tell us how you come to be wandering in such a place as this—although I could hazard a guess,' murmured the Captain.

The old man salved the burden which he had dropped in his agitation before he answered. 'I was Rochelle's prisoner,' he said, and as the words left his lips Mark remembered where he had seen him. He had been one of his father's hands on the *Silver Spray*.

'Ben,' he said eagerly, 'you were with my father on his ship?'

'That's right enow, I were with him,' admitted the old man, nodding vigorously. 'We was both took prisoners together by that blood-stained wretch, Rochelle—may God punish him for his villainies. He took pleasure in making us work like slaves, beating us . . . and . . .' The old man broke off, shaking with uncontrollable fury. 'No wonder men call him the

Butcher,' he choked. 'If I could only get these here hands o' mine on 'im just once . . .' He turned to Mark. 'You see how he slew that poor Spanish lad—not that I've any love for the Dons—and with his father standing there to see the foul act. And him with a boy of his own, too. What 'ud 'e say, I wonder, if some one treated 'is boy——'

'Yes, but never mind about that now,' interrupted Mark. 'What news can you give me of my father?'

'Ever since we was took we have lived in the shadow of death, me and your pore father,' continued the old man, still trembling with anger. 'Then Rochelle decided on this expedition and made us row in the boats.'

Mark remembered seeing a second man in the boat with his father, but in the stress of his emotion he had paid little attention to him. 'Yes, yes,' he said, 'go on. Where is my father now? Was he with you when you escaped?'

Mark felt his heart sink as a look of despair came over the old man's face.

'He's with the boats,' he said, 'him being sick with the fever. Don't take on, though; you see, it were like this 'ere——'

'Where are the boats?'

' 'Bout a mile up the river from where the Spanish camp was.'

'But——'

'Let him finish,' interrupted the Captain. 'Go on, Ben; tell us what happened.'

'Well, this were the way of it,' continued the old man. 'Yesterday we come up to a waterfall, the bottom all choked up with trees what had come down the river, and we see at a glance that there weren't no chance of getting the boats past it. That meant that every one must march, and Rochelle says, looking at us, that he ain't goin' to take no useless mouths with 'im. I think he'd 'a cut our throats there and then, but at that minute up runs a fellow wot had been left behind to say as the Dons was on our 'eels. At that Rochelle curses like a madman, and nothing will suit 'im but 'e must cut them to bits there and then. Your father was still laying in the boat, him being sick like I told you, and that was the last I see of 'im, me being made to carry a barrel of powder down for the attack on the Spanish camp. Ye didn't see me, but I see all that passed, though I couldn't get free, me being tied by the leg to a tree. Well, as soon as you and the Captain has gone there's a fine old to-do, Rochelle's men saying as they ain't going to share no doubloons with any new lot. Rochelle says he'll fix it, and promises to shoot Captain Champion at the first chance, and a good deal more talk of the same sort. Then I has a bit o' luck, the first as I've 'ad for many a long day,

and you can lay to that. I see a knife wot had been dropped in the fight laying in the grass near me. I cuts myself free, and into the bushes I creep, and so comes back 'ere. 'Twarn't no use me going for to fetch Colonel Lawson, sad as I was at leaving 'im, 'cause he was a mile up the river like I told you, and 'im being too sick of the fever to walk and me not strong enough to carry him.'

The Captain touched the bundle, still lying where Ben had dropped it, with the toe of his boot. 'What's in here, Ben?' he asked. 'We watched you fetch it from the river bank.'

'Ah, that's another thing,' muttered the old man. 'You see, allus we had talked of escaping if we had 'alf a chance, though no chance never came. Still, not knowing that, we put some biscuits ashore once in a while at a place wot we'd know again, so that if either of us got free we shouldn't have to walk all the way back to the coast with nowt to eat. I recollected putting a bag of biscuits ashore here near the old boat, by which I marked the place down, so I made straight for it with all sails set, for no bite have I had for these two days past. In some ways, it was me filching the grub like this wot has made Rochelle short; every one thinks the other has took it, and it's done me good to see the trouble I caused. Wot's left is divided amongst the men now, to carry for the last part of the journey.'

The Captain regarded the old man moodily for some seconds after he had finished speaking. 'Well, we have some food, and that's one thing,' he said at last. 'We've only to get your father, Mark, and we can steer a straight course for the *Rose*.'

'Faith! *Only*, did you say?' replied Mark bitterly. 'We must rescue him from the clutches of that fiend, but it's hard to see how it's to be done.'

'There was never a cage but what there was not a way out,' declared the Captain. 'Give me leave to think awhile, and maybe I'll find it.'

HOW MARK RESCUED HIS FATHER

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FOR some time, while the sun sank into the tree-tops to the west, they all sat silent; the Captain staring at the ground, Mark chewing the end of a twig, the others staring blankly at the river.

Suddenly the Captain looked up. 'Did I understand you to say something about a boat, Ben—I mean, a boat lying somewhere about here?' he asked.

'Aye, the old 'un.'

'What old 'un?'

'One of the *Merry Hammer's* boats. She warn't much use, anyways, even afore she stove a hole in her bows on the snag of a sunken tree, coming round this 'ere bend. She was run ashore here and left. Rochelle he wouldn't stop to mend her, reckoning as she wasn't wanted any longer, so the stuff was taken out of her and put in the other boat.'

The Captain started. 'Do you mean that the boat was actually left down there in the water?'

'That's it. She ain't much use, if that's what you're a-thinking. I'd sooner walk than put to sea in her.'

'I wasn't thinking of putting to sea in her,' returned the Captain. 'How badly is she damaged?'

'There's a hole stove in her starb'd bow, like you could put your fist through.'

'But surely if the hole is no bigger than that it could be plugged with a wad of rag, or the like?'

'I reckon so, though you'd have to keep a-bailin'. She's pretty old and rotten, and leaks in the seams as well.'

'Still, she'd stay afloat for a time, maybe?' persisted the Captain.

'I reckon so, as long as you kept a-bailin'.'

'Then let's go and take a look at her,' suggested the Captain. 'If we've got to get to this place where Rochelle's boats are moored, then there's only one way of doing it, and that's by the river. Is he still at the Spanish camp, or has he moved back to his own?'

'Moved back to his own, judging by the talk I heard.'

The Captain asked no more questions, for by this time they had reached the boat, a small, worm-eaten, dilapidated-looking yawl that lay half in and

half out of the water. With some difficulty she was hauled up and the water tilted out of her, revealing the hole that had been the cause of her being abandoned. Put back on the water she floated, but even Mark's light weight as he stepped into her was sufficient to force the hole below the water line, so that she began to fill at once.

'Get back in the stern,' ordered the Captain. 'That, methinks, should lift the bows clear—and you, Pierro, keep your eyes on the bank so that we are not taken by surprise.'

Again the boat was hauled out, and the hole plugged with the bag that had contained Ben's biscuits, the Captain remarking that they could be carried in their pockets. There were no oars, but the Captain ripped up a floor-board, which would, he said, answer the purpose. 'Well, now that we have a boat things look brighter,' he declared.

'What is your plan?' asked Mark, eagerly.

'Let us get back to our hiding-place and I'll tell you,' replied the Captain, pulling the boat ashore so that she could not drift away, after which they made their way back into the forest.

'Tis nothing of a plan that I could recommend with confidence,' went on the Captain. 'Merely that we take the boat across into the deepest shadow of the other bank, creep along as best we can until we are opposite or above Rochelle's camp, and then cross over in the hope of coming upon the other boats, and, of course, your father. Unless a guard has been placed over the boats—and from what I've seen of Rochelle's methods he does not trouble much about guards—it should not be impossible. But until we've seen the place 'tis hard to judge what may be done. One thing is certain, though; we cannot all get in the boat or she will founder. 'Tis a task for one, or two at most, one to row and the other to bail. More would but increase the hazard without advantage.'

'I'll go,' declared Mark, 'and Pierro shall come with me.'

'Seeing that ye're the lightest, 'twould be foolish to deny you a place in the boat,' began the Captain, but he broke off suddenly and stared down the river in a listening attitude. A puzzled look crept over his face. 'Tis a strange sound,' he said.

'Strange indeed,' agreed Mark. 'List!'

They stood silent while the sound, still distant, crept up the river.

'Strange or not,' muttered the Captain, when they had stood thus for some minutes, 'it can only be one thing. A body of men are coming up the river, and since no disciplined troops would be allowed to make such a pandemonium, they can only be pirates. I have it. Yes, that's the answer. 'Tis

young Rochelle. I forgot to tell ye that while we were at sea without you we picked up a castaway who had left Tortuga since we were there. He could tell us little except that Rochelle had started with fewer men than he had hoped for, but he had left his son behind on the island to beat up for more, and if he found them, to follow on. The incident passed from my mind since it was of little importance to us at that time. In any case, I paid little heed to the story. This must be young Rochelle coming now with the new recruits. I can think of nothing else. 'Tis not Spaniards, for they march in silence. Stap me! but it looks as if we are caught between two fires.'

In the darkening twilight they sat down to consider this new development.

'They've stopped to make camp,' said Mark presently. 'The sounds approach no nearer.'

'Methinks ye're right,' agreed the Captain. 'Now, surely this can be turned to good account.' He fell silent again, deep in thought, while the others watched him anxiously. At last he looked up. 'I have a plan,' he said slowly. 'It is not unlike the first I had, and it means that we shall have to part company, Pierro going with you, Mark, and me remaining here to see how the plan works out. If it goes wrong, why, then I shall be free to act, and help ye if need be.'

'What is the plan?' asked Mark quickly.

'To cause a diversion in Rochelle's camp so that his ruffians will have something to look at as well as the river, which should increase your chances of reaching your father unobserved.'

'How do you propose to cause the diversion?' inquired Mark, mystified.

'By sending young Rochelle and those with him up to join the others.'

'But how?'

'Thus,' said the Captain. 'By sending Ben down to them with a message pretending to come from Rochelle, saying that his scouts have heard the party coming, and ordering it to proceed at once to the main camp. Wilt go, Ben? In such a place as this 'tis hardly likely that young Rochelle will question whether ye are in his father's service. After you have delivered the message you must hang behind, and slip back here when no one is watching ye.'

'Ay, I'd do anything to get even with that butchering hound,' hissed the old man, his eyes glittering with hate. 'Ham-strung my shipmates, he did, one after another, and threw them in the sea like so much garbage. Jim Gates he skinned——'

‘All right, Ben,’ broke in the Captain. ‘Tell us no more of what he did, or our anger may distort our vision. He’ll get his deserts one day, never fear.’

‘And the sooner the better, says I,’ mumbled the old man.

The Captain turned to Mark. ‘’Tis three miles or more to Rochelle’s camp,’ he observed. ‘’Twill take you near two hours to reach it in the boat. The Butcher’s son, if indeed ’tis he, will do it in half the time. Ye must judge it that ye both arrive together. In the confusion of his son’s arrival Rochelle should have no eyes for the river, although it is hardly likely in any case that he would see ye if ye keep close in the shadow of the other bank.’

‘I’ll be off at once,’ declared Mark, ‘so that ye need waste no time in sending the message to young Rochelle. If the message were delayed, and the camp had settled down, he might be loth to start until dawn, and thus would our plan miscarry.’

‘True,’ agreed the Captain. ‘Very well, be off. I’d come with ye, but my place is here to stand in reserve for either end should things go wrong. Whether you find your father or not, return here, make no doubt of that. ’Tis a risky thing to part company in such a place as this, and I’m only permitting it because I know ye’ll obey my orders to the letter, and return here, as I have said. To depart from the plan might end in one mistaking t’other for an enemy, with dire results. So whatever may befall, come back here.’

‘I will,’ promised Mark, and was about to pass on when Ben caught him by the wrist.

‘Whatever may befall,’ he muttered fiercely, echoing the Captain’s words.

Mark nodded, a little astonished at the old man’s vehemence. ‘I’ll stick to orders,’ he declared, and after a silent handshake with the Captain, set off on his perilous mission with Pierro following in his footsteps like a shadow.

Together they lifted the dilapidated boat and put it on the black surface of the river, for the moon had not yet risen. Without further speech they pushed it out into the stream, heading for the opposite bank, Pierro paddling with the improvised oar while Mark bailed out the water that trickled in round the hastily mended leak with the shell of a gourd that he had brought for the purpose.

They reached the opposite bank, and, within the black shadow of the overhanging branches, forced the boat up the stream, making better progress than they expected, for in some places the water was shallow, and by using the board as a pole, faster speed was maintained than by using it as an oar. Several times where the water was very shallow Pierro got out and pushed

the boat from behind; on one occasion he persuaded Mark to get out too, when he tilted the boat on its side, thus allowing the water to run out of her.

They passed the unfortunate Spaniards' camp, now deserted, with more than one apprehensive glance, and a little while afterwards saw, for the first time, the reflection of camp fires on the tops of the trees ahead, which gave them the approximate position of Rochelle's encampment. A minute or two afterwards they heard the first sounds of the party coming up the river, and Mark's heart began to beat, for he knew that the Captain and Ben must have succeeded in their part of the plan.

The voices on the bank increased so quickly in volume that he feared they might be late—that Rochelle and his son would meet before the boat reached the place where they were to cross the river again. Torches flickered eerily along the forest trail, and by the time Rochelle's camp was in sight it was astir with hurrying figures, for the noise made by the new-comers was considerable. Fresh branches were thrown on the camp fires.

Mark urged Pierro to hurry, for although they were still in the deep shade of the trees, the light cast by the fires was increasing every moment, and he feared that the glow might spread to them and betray them.

The noise of the new-comers' approach was now nearly drowned by the steady splash of water, and peering ahead in the gloom Mark saw the waterfall of which Ben had spoken. Looking across the river, at this point some seventy or eighty yards wide, he caught his breath as his eyes fell on the dark shapes of several boats moored against the bank. In one of them lay his father—or, bearing in mind what Ben had said about useless mouths, was he already too late? Mark bit his lip in an agony of suspense, but it did not prevent him from observing that a curious quiet seemed to have fallen on Rochelle's camp, which also, in some extraordinary way, had become almost deserted. One or two men were creeping about furtively on the outskirts of the lighted area; that was all.

Mark did not pay particular heed to this, assuming that the men had gone off down the track to meet the new party, the members of which were now cheering as they advanced, their torches casting a weird light on the silent river. The great moment had come.

With his heart pounding against his ribs, Mark dropped the gourd and helped Pierro to propel the boat towards their objective, for they had approached as near to the waterfall as they dared; indeed, they were damped and chilled by the cloud of steam-like spray that rose from the boiling cauldron at its foot. The fallen trees to which Ben had also referred helped rather than impeded them, for by reaching over the side of the boat they

were able to move forward by pressing against them, or pulling on the branches that protruded from the water. Half-way across Mark had to have recourse to bailing again, but Pierro pushed the boat along, and they drew swiftly nearer to their goal.

The last few yards were the most dangerous, for Mark realized with acute misgivings that the new-comers had still not quite joined up with those in the camp, and should any one turn and look in their direction the moving boat could hardly fail to be seen. Another few yards, however, and they would be comparatively safe, for it would take a keen eye to distinguish the boat from the others.

What with the roar of the waterfall and the cheering on the bank, it was impossible to hear anything else; but Mark did not worry on that account. He was on his knees, reaching forward towards the first boat. Was it the one they sought? The side of their little craft grated against the larger one. It was empty. The second one also was empty. Mark trembled with excitement and anxiety as he eased the boat along towards the third one. Seizing the gunwale he looked over the side. At one end lay two negroes, asleep or dead, he knew not which, nor did he stop to find out, for at the other end, face downward, lay the body of a white man.

In his anxiety to get aboard Mark nearly upset the boat, but he steadied it, and then dropped on his knees beside the recumbent figure. Was it his father? Exerting all his strength he turned the body over and peered down into the face. The eyes were closed, but one glance was enough. It was his father. He perceived that he was alive, but unconscious, although whether he had been wounded or was in a state of coma from the fever it was impossible to say. Mark beckoned Pierro forward to lift the body, for it was too heavy for him to move alone. It occurred to him to change boats, but the one in which his father lay was a heavy, cumbersome affair, and he decided that they would do better in their own little skiff. They would certainly make better speed in it, provided it could be kept clear of water.

Without a word, Pierro picked up his master with no more effort than if he had been an empty sack, and laying him at full length on the floor of their own boat, picked up the paddle again. Mark got back into the boat and pushed off, hardly daring to believe that what they had set out to do had, in fact, been accomplished, precisely as it had been planned. They had not even been challenged.

As quickly as they dared they began the return journey across the river, Mark bailing for all he was worth, but at the same time snatching quick glances at the still deserted camp on the bank. Not a soul was now in sight. Presumably the pirates had evacuated it in order to meet the new-comers.

There was no other explanation that he could think of. He did not care. It had made their task even more easy than he had dared to hope. Another minute and they would be under the low hanging branches of the far bank, where they would be fairly safe.

They had just reached it, and Mark was settling down for the journey down the river, when the head of the new column reached Rochelle's camp. Instantly he froze rigid, the gourd with which he had been bailing held midway between the water and the boat. At first he could not believe his eyes, for striding along in front of a straggling crew of sailors, brandishing a cutlass, was Captain Champion. Mark blinked and looked again, but there could be no mistaking the blue, brass-buttoned velvet coat and plumed hat; he could have picked them out from a thousand others. Wide-eyed, he glanced round at Pierro, still paddling unconcernedly, and then back at the shore. The thing was incomprehensible. Feeling water about his knees, for he was kneeling on the bottom of the boat, he bailed again furiously for a moment, and then looked back at the camp, his eyes drawn to it by an irresistible fascination.

It was at that moment that the calamity occurred, a calamity so dreadful that it stunned him into a condition of open-mouthed horror. Led by the Captain, still brandishing a cutlass, the new-comers had almost reached the middle of the camp, and were just slowing down, when from all sides crashed the roar of musketry. Volley after volley blazed out of the trees surrounding the camp, so that on the instant the newly arrived column was thrown into the utmost confusion. Many fell; others blazed back at the flashes with muskets and pistols; yells and curses filled the air. Pandemonium reigned.

Mark's eyes had been on the leading figure when the first volley rang out. Breathless with consternation, he saw the tall figure stumble, fall, and then struggle to its knees. Another volley and the man collapsed. A moment later Rochelle himself darted out from the trees, and pointing a musket at the quivering body, the muzzle almost touching it, fired. At the roar of the explosion the prone body twitched convulsively, rolled over and then lay still.

In a daze Mark became aware that Pierro was bailing madly with the gourd, which had dropped from his nerveless fingers. He saw that the boat was half full of water, and it was the sight of his father, half submerged, that brought him to some semblance of normality. Taking the gourd from Pierro's hands, he started bailing methodically, struggling to force his numbed faculties into some sort of order. What ought he to do? Every nerve in his body cried out to him to attempt to rescue the Captain, and, indeed, it

is likely that he would have made some effort in this direction—to his undoing—but for the fact that the uselessness of such an action was only too apparent, for several yelling pirates were now firing their muskets into the blue coat.

The firing began to die away, and some one threw more wood on one of the fires so that it blazed up. A curious hush fell; it was as though all noise had been turned off by a tap. Only the steady drone of the waterfall persisted.

By this time the boat was well below the camp and rapidly drawing away from it. This Mark observed in a curiously detached manner, deriving little satisfaction from it. He was conscious only of one thing, and the words seemed to beat into his brain. The Captain was dead. Of that there could be no possible shadow of doubt. That being so, nothing else really mattered. He could not even devote the attention which he felt he should to his father.

With an even, methodical movement he went on bailing automatically. He did not even look round when a sudden roar went up from the camp. Above it he could hear Rochelle's unforgettable voice, screeching curses, curses so dreadful that he shuddered. Vaguely he wondered what was happening, but he was not really interested—not sufficiently interested to try to find out or even give the matter serious thought. The Captain was lying dead in Rochelle's camp. That was the predominating thought in his brain, and beyond that he was unable to think.

Still in a horrid nightmare of mental agony, he felt the boat lurch, and looking round, he saw that Pierro was wading. They had evidently arrived at one of the shallow places, and, thus lightened, the boat travelled more easily.

He had little recollection of the rest of the journey. The black, mysterious forest seemed eternal. Was there no end to it, he wondered miserably? It seemed to have been gliding past for days, like a menacing shadow; he felt that it might go on for ever. But at long last he saw the bend which marked the spot where they had embarked, and steered a diagonal course across the river towards it. He did not know what he was going to do, but in a dim sort of way he felt that he ought to pick up Ben, or acquaint him with what had happened, although he did not really care if he saw him again or not. Still, he owed the old sailor something, he reflected, and he could not do less than land. In any case, he had promised that he would.

The boat brushed against the bushes and Mark stepped out into the shallow water. 'Lift my father ashore while I hold the boat,' he told Pierro, dully.

‘Faith, so you got him, then?’ exclaimed a clear voice from the track. Mark nearly fell backwards into the river. The moon was just showing above the tree-tops, and in its pale radiance he could just make out a figure standing on the bank, peering towards him.

It was Captain Champion.

‘*You!*’ cried Mark incredulously.

HOW THE VOYAGERS RETURNED DOWN THE RIVER

HOW THE VOYAGERS RETURNED DOWN THE RIVER

To say that Mark was astounded would be but mildly to express his feelings. He was staggered. As far as he was concerned, the dead had come to life, which could be nothing less than a miracle, and miracles, his common sense told him, no longer happened.

For a moment or two he stood staring stupidly; then, with a cry of joy, he rushed up the bank and embraced the man who he had thought was dead. He perceived that he was hatless, and in his shirt sleeves, and this gave him his first glimmering of the truth. Laughing almost hysterically, he wrung the Captain's hand.

The Captain's next remark brought him back to earth with a rush, however. 'Faith, methinks your father needs more attention than I do,' he observed crisply, and pushed his way down to the boat. 'What ails him?' he added, looking up at Mark, who had followed him.

'I know not, for I have had no chance to inquire, but it would seem that he is far gone in a fever. He burns like fire itself,' answered Mark.

The Captain felt the Colonel's pulse. 'Yes,' he said quietly, as if to himself. 'Alas, we have no physic here to give him,' he went on with a worried frown. 'And this is not the place to linger after what has happened—at least, so I judge from the shots I heard a while ago. Did ye see what happened at the camp?'

'I did indeed,' replied Mark, and described briefly what had happened, not forgetting to mention his mental anguish when the Captain—as he had thought—had fallen dead. 'Who was wearing your hat and coat?' he concluded.

'Rochelle's son.'

After his first start of horror, Mark nodded sombrely. 'So that was it,' he said slowly. 'Rochelle has slain his own son. Well, if ever mortal man deserved retribution from the hands of God, then Rochelle is that man,' he added in a hollow voice. 'Strange, is it not, that this should come upon him so soon after the murder of the Spanish captain's son before his father's eyes? Yet perhaps it is not strange. Heaven must have taken a hand in what has passed this night. How did it come about?'

‘ ’Twas Ben’s doing,’ replied the Captain simply. ‘He borrowed my hat and jacket to take to young Rochelle as a token of good faith, as a present from his father, he being in need of fresh attire after his journey up the river. It would seem that the son, and his men, walked into the trap which the father had laid for us. As he was expecting my lads, when the party arrived with what looked like me at their head—well, ’tis easy enough to see how Rochelle was mistaken. Rochelle shot his son thinking it was me, thus paying for his own treachery. But this is neither the time nor place for gossiping; we must on our way, for there is no knowing what Rochelle may do in the madness of his fury. He’ll have little heart to go on, methinks; ’tis more than likely that he will start back now that he has learned how he has been tricked, and it will not do for us to fall into his hands—not that he can do us more hurt than he would have done before. But let us away. As soon as it is day we will seek a hiding-place and see what can be done for your father; with neither light nor salves, there is little we can do for him here.’

‘How shall we travel?’ asked Mark.

‘That is a problem not easy to answer,’ declared the Captain. ‘Pierro could, no doubt, carry your father, certainly with Ben’s assistance, but he will be more comfortable in the boat. I think ’twould be better if you stayed in the boat with your father, with Pierro to paddle while you bail out the water, and thus make as much progress as you can. We cannot all get in the boat or it will sink, so Ben and I must walk along the bank. In any case, I am loth to part with the boat, rotten as she is, for there is small chance of our finding another this side of Chagraw Creek. If there are sounds of pursuit, we must, perforce, take refuge in the forest, so come apace if I call.’

With these arrangements Mark was bound to agree. Pierro could, he knew, carry his father without effort, but the unsteady motion would have been a severe trial for one so sick. So he took his place as before in the bows of the boat, while Pierro got in the stern, and with Colonel Lawson lying on a bed of reeds on the bottom, they set off down the river, keeping level with the others on the bank.

It was a nightmare journey. The heat was oppressive, and after the excitement of his adventures Mark was worn out. From time to time black shapes broke the surface of the sullen water, while surging ripples told of horrors out of sight below. But at long last the day began to dawn, and shortly afterwards the first sounds of pursuit were heard. A distant shout was answered by another; that was all; but it told Mark all he needed to know, and he steered the boat towards the bank where the Captain and Ben were waiting.

‘Rochelle comes, I think,’ he said briefly. ‘Shall we hide and let them pass?’

‘’Twould be better if we could keep in front, though hide we must if he looks like overtaking us,’ returned the Captain with knitted brow, as he examined the unconscious man in the boat. ‘The fever has abated somewhat, methinks,’ he observed. ‘Your father seems more comfortable. ’Twould be a pity to move him if it can be avoided. Could ye walk awhile?’

‘I’ll try,’ offered Mark.

‘Good. Then let Ben take your place in the boat while you march level on the bank. I’ll walk behind as rear-guard and acquaint you if Rochelle draws nearer. He must have many wounded men with him, so he himself will have to stop and rest from time to time.’

They set off again in the new order, Mark fighting off his weariness by sheer force of will. The forest seemed to bear down on him. He hated it, but he bore its malign influence as best he could, for there was nothing else he could do. But by midday he was stumbling, and presently the Captain overtook him.

‘I dropped far back, yet heard no sound of our pursuers, from which I gather that they have halted,’ he said.

‘I cannot go much farther,’ gasped Mark.

‘Nor can any of us,’ agreed the Captain. ‘I will tell Pierro to bring the boat to the shore and hide it under some bushes, after which we will find a place in the forest to rest.’

Distantly, as in a dream, Mark watched these arrangements carried out. The boat was hidden from sight of any one passing down the track. The Captain found a small clearing in the forest which had evidently once been used by Indians, although there was no sign of them now. Colonel Lawson was carried up and made as comfortable as possible on a bed of leaves. Mark munched a biscuit mechanically and then lay down. He had a vague recollection of the green tracery swaying high above him, and then he fell asleep.

It was dark when he awoke, and he started up nervously. Ben and Pierro were lying near him, still asleep, but of the Captain there was no sign, although this did not alarm him, for he guessed that he had gone back up the track to scout. In this supposition he was correct, for shortly afterwards the Captain returned, his silken shirt all torn and his hair in disarray from his travels.

‘What news?’ asked Mark.

‘Rochelle is coming back, as I thought. He has camped about five miles up the river,’ answered the Captain. ‘There seems to be some trouble in his camp, too. Rochelle is raging like a madman; he has the strength of an ox, and would march on, but his men, with Pallanca amongst them, are in bad case, and insist on resting. When I left Rochelle was arguing with Pallanca. So much I gathered. Nevertheless, if my guess is right, Rochelle will soon be afoot, so as it is nearly day we had better proceed.’

‘Nearly day!’ gasped Mark.

‘For sure,’ returned the Captain. ‘You have slept like a log for hours.’

‘How is my father?’

‘Mending, methinks—but slowly. The fever has passed, leaving him very weak. He sleeps now, but he has been awake and spoken with me.’

‘Spoken?’

‘Yes. He knows where he is and that you are here. I was tempted to wake you, but you were so exhausted that I thought it best to let you have your sleep out.’

Mark watched eagerly to see if his father awoke as he was carried to the boat, but he did not, and just as the sky was turning grey they continued their journey down the river.

For three days and nights they pressed on, Mark sometimes travelling in the boat, sometimes marching, the party resting when the pirates halted, although slowly but surely the pursuit drew nearer, a fact ascertained by the Captain, who often dropped back to observe the pirates’ progress. Colonel Lawson’s periods of consciousness became more frequent, and from Mark’s own lips he learned the story of his rescue, but he was still too weak to march.

They were talking thus on the fourth night after the rescue when the Captain, who had been up the river on his usual scouting expedition, returned. ‘They have halted,’ he said, ‘although I judge that the rest will be a short one. Rochelle is crazed to reach the coast, which cannot be more than a league or two away. They are out of food—and so, for that matter, are we. Still, another march will take us to the creek, so the time has come to consider what is best to be done. The problem that exercises my mind is what has happened at the creek in our absence? Are the Spaniards still there, or did young Rochelle overcome them? although that seems hardly likely. If not, Rochelle will have to attempt it, or thus it seems to me, since he must have a ship to get away. Spaniards or pirates, it matters little to us—they are both our enemies; but we shall have no need to fight, for if Dan has obeyed my orders he will be on the watch for us at a cove some four leagues down

the coast. Our plan, then, it seems, is to enter the forest some distance above the creek, and, by cutting through it, reach the coast clear of either Spaniards or pirates. When that is done we must follow the coast until we come to the cove, trusting that Dan is there. If he is not, then we must wait until he comes. Our greatest danger seems to be that Rochelle will seek us, either on foot or by sea, so the sooner we are on our way the better.'

To this plan the others readily agreed, and they set off on the last stage of their journey, Mark taking turns in the boat with his father.

About two hours later the Captain called him to the shore. 'I remember this place,' he said, indicating a bend in the river, which had broadened considerably. 'As we have enemies so close in front, and behind, it would be a needless risk to go farther in the boat. Since we cannot take it with us we will sink it here and then proceed on foot. 'Twill do you no harm now, Colonel, if Pierro carries you.'

The Colonel protested that he was able to walk, as indeed he was, but his steps were faltering, and rather than he should tax his meagre strength the Captain decided that Pierro and Ben should carry him. The boat that had served them so well was sunk, and proceeding now with the utmost caution the travellers made their way along the bank towards the creek. The hour was not far short of dawn when the last bend came into sight; beyond it, they knew, lay the river mouth.

' 'Tis here we must wait for daylight and then take to the forest,' declared the Captain. 'Nevertheless, methinks 'twould be a good thing if we could discover what has happened at the creek, for should the Spaniards still hold the place we shall know that Rochelle must stay and fight, in which case we need not hurry ourselves unduly. If, on the other hand, a pirate craft is there—or there is no ship there at all—we must look to ourselves, for Rochelle will soon be on our tracks. Therefore I think it best if you hide in the forest while I go forward to see what lies ahead.'

'May I come with you?' asked Mark.

' 'Twould be better if you rested,' demurred the Captain.

'I am in no mood to rest,' declared Mark.

'Very well,' agreed the Captain. 'In any case, it is not far to go. Step warily, though, for we are on dangerous ground, and there may be sentries posted.'

Leaving Colonel Lawson in the care of Ben and Pierro, they crept forward, pausing every few steps to listen. All was silent. They crept still nearer, and, passing the knoll from which Mark had first seen his father going up the river, came upon the creek, still and silent in the mysterious

light of the waning moon. There was no wind, and the sheltered cove lay like a sheet of deep blue glass, unbroken except in one place where the hull of a ship loomed darkly.

Mark stared at the dark outline unbelievably for a minute; then he looked at the Captain. 'Why . . . it's the *Rose*,' he gasped. 'I could tell her lines anywhere.'

The Captain shook himself slightly as one who recovers from a shock. 'Yes, it's the *Rose*,' he said, with a curious little laugh. 'And here we are, creeping up on our own ship like a pair of escaped vagabonds. For what reason Dan has brought her round here I do not know, unless it be that, finding the Spaniards gone, he hoped to catch us as we came down the river. 'Tis mighty glad I am to see her, for it will save our legs a dozen miles or more—although I must say that they keep a bad watch. We might be pirates for all they know. I'll put a flea in Dan's ear for this, though no doubt he has acted for the best. Let us give them a hail, and ask them to put a boat out for us.' So saying, the Captain raised his voice in a loud hail, which echoed eerily across the silent water.

It was answered immediately from the ship, and there came the sounds of a bustle on deck.

'Who's there?' called a voice.

'Captain Champion, waiting to come aboard,' answered the Captain. Then, turning to Mark, 'Let us go back and fetch the others,' he said.

Such was their relief that they trotted back to where the others were waiting, a trifle alarmed by the calling. They hastened to tell them of their good fortune, and it was in high spirits that they all set off for the creek. By the time they reached it the pink flush of early dawn was creeping above the rim of the ocean, bathing the scene in a soft purple glow; but it was still twilight, and the dozen or more figures grouped on the beach about the *Rose*'s long-boat were unrecognizable as they hurried towards them.

As they approached the figures opened out suddenly, fanwise, in a manner that could only be described as furtive. The Captain pulled up dead, feeling for his sword. It was too late to go back.

Mark stopped, too, instinctively aware of danger, but unable to say precisely whence it came. He looked again at the ship, and saw beyond question that it was the *Rose*. There was no possibility of a mistake. Yet the sailors, less than a score of paces away, were levelling muskets.

'I do not understand what has happened, but I fear that we have jumped with both feet into a trap,' murmured the Captain. ' 'Twere folly to fight, yet we cannot run and leave your father.'

The figures walked towards them. One detached itself, that of a little, ferrety-faced man, wearing on his head a red nightcap. Mark stared incredulously, thinking that another miracle must have happened, for he recognized the man at once.

It was Nicholas Archer, the pirate whom he had last seen on the deck of a British man-of-war, on his way to jail.

HOW MARK RETURNED TO THE *ROSE*

CHAPTER XVI

HOW MARK RETURNED TO THE *ROSE*

AFTER his first gasp of horror and amazement Mark crouched as if to spring, looking wildly from left to right. He felt that he ought to do something—but what? With something inside him going down like an anchor, he realized that he could do nothing. He was not even armed. Had he been alone, he would, he knew, have run for it, bullets or no bullets, but he could not leave his father, who, from the expression on his face, could not fully understand the cause of the others' dismay. Neither could Ben.

'Rochelle is on his way down the river,' announced the Captain calmly, playing his only card—bluff.

Archer grinned evilly. 'E'll be right glad to see ye, I'll lay. Bring 'em aboard, boys. We'll make 'em dance on their own deck.'

Under the muskets of the pirates, the prisoners were pushed into the boat, Colonel Lawson's feeble protests only causing him to be jostled more roughly than the rest.

The Captain's eyes flashed up and down the beach as he stepped into the tiny wavelets that lapped the shore, trying to grasp what had happened, wondering what had become of his own crew, and seeking a way of escape, however hazardous. He, too, would have risked the musket balls of the pirates had he been alone, but, like Mark, he could not bring himself to leave the others, which would have looked suspiciously like desertion. Yet concerted action was manifestly suicidal. He could think clearly enough, but felt that whatever he did would only expedite the end, and while that was likely to come soon enough, he preferred to cling to the old adage that while there's life there's hope. So in the end he did nothing, and in a few minutes the boat was skimming across the placid surface of the creek, softly beautiful in the early morning light, towards the *Rose*, along whose rail some twenty or thirty men, all strangers, were watching the proceedings.

'I trust you find my ship to your liking,' said the Captain sarcastically to Archer.

'Ay, we like it well enough,' grinned the pirate, who did not attempt to conceal his satisfaction at the turn things had taken.

'My own lads must have gone a-walking, methinks,' went on the Captain, in the hope of learning what had happened to his crew.

‘There was only four or five of ’em at home when we called,’ admitted Archer. ‘And they died without a squeak,’ he added cheerfully.

Mark glanced at the Captain, who, however, could only shrug his shoulders helplessly.

‘How did you get here yourself?’ he asked Archer.

‘Well, seeing as ’ow we are all jolly companions together, in a manner o’ speaking, there ain’t no secret about that,’ was the frank answer. ‘The lieutenant, being so kind as to put me in the jail at Port Royal——’

The Captain started. ‘Port Royal!’ he broke in. ‘I thought he was bound for Georgetown.’

‘Maybe ’e was, but a storm of wind made ’im glad to put in anywheres, and Port Royal it ’ad to be; so, some one forgetting to lock the door of the jail, I borrowed me a right handy little barque, and with a few brisk lads to keep me company made for Tortuga, where, learning that Captain Rochelle had sailed without his old shipmate, why, I made so bold as to follow, having a little bother on the way with a tall ship, in which we both did ourselves a power of damage. So it was right glad I was to see the *Rose* waiting for me, my own craft being in a fair way of going to the bottom, where she is now, if I ain’t no liar.’ Archer, exuding smug satisfaction, reeled off the explanation boastfully, and there was little reason to doubt that he was telling the truth.

There were big gaps in the story, but it had been sufficient to enable Mark to form an idea of what had happened. What he could not understand was how the pirates came to find the *Rose* abandoned, or practically so, for this he must have done, otherwise the crew would have put up a fight, and the ship would have shown some signs of battle, whereas there was not a mark on her hull, as he was now able to observe.

Archer’s manner changed as soon as they were on deck; cursing and lashing himself into a fury, he pointed an accusing finger at the Captain as he reminded him of their last encounter.

‘Tush, man, make an end,’ broke in the Captain impatiently, when he could bear no more. ‘My mistake was that I did not hang ye out of hand, king’s ship or no king’s ship; ’tis a mistake I’ll not make twice, I promise you.’

Archer bellowed in his rage. ‘Give me a rope’s end, somebody; come on, you lubbers, a rope’s end, and watch me flail the hide of him. Blister me! Send me to the gallows, he would . . .’ The pirate choked in his rage.

Somebody handed him a length of rope, and he advanced upon the Captain menacingly, making the rope sing through the air; but before he

could carry out his threat there was a hail from aloft.

‘They’re a-coming,’ cried the sailor at the lookout.

‘Who’s a-comin’?’ shouted Archer.

‘Rochelle, I reckon,’ was the reply.

Archer glared at the Captain. ‘What’s he a-comin’ back for?’ he demanded.

‘You’ll be able to ask him yourself presently,’ said the Captain calmly. ‘And let me give you a piece of advice. If you would stand high in his favour, ask him what comes of killing sons in front of their fathers.’

Archer waved a dirty hand. ‘Take ’em below,’ he ordered. ‘Maybe Rochelle will want a word with ’em. Put ’em with the other.’

The prisoners were dragged down the companion-way, thrust into a spare cabin, and the door bolted on them.

An elderly man who was already there, and who had looked up with startled eyes at the entrance of the pirates, glanced at them questioningly.

The Captain raised his eyebrows and then bowed. ‘Captain Champion, and what’s left of his crew, at your service, sir,’ he said.

The old man bowed in return. ‘Sir Alexander Frisby, your companion in misfortune, sirs, if I may judge correctly,’ he answered in a well-modulated voice. ‘Have the villains captured another ship?—I heard no gunfire.’

‘They already had it when I arrived, sir,’ answered the Captain grimly. ‘’Tis my ship, the *Rose of England*, ye are in. Not that we are like to be in her long,’ he added.

‘You think they’ll murder us?’

‘Without a doubt of it. Archer is just a common pirate, and bad enough, mayhap, but one is on his way here now beside whom he would be fit for a conventicle.’

‘You mean?’

‘Gabriel Rochelle, he whom they dub the Butcher.’

The old man’s face paled. ‘’Twas an evil chance that sent me from the shores of England,’ he said bitterly.

‘’Twould be foolish to deny it,’ murmured the Captain briefly. ‘How came you here, sir?’

‘I was on my way to Kingston when the ship was taken by pirates. I know not why they spared me, since the rest of the ship’s company were slain—or so I understand. But how come you here? Are you a pirate, too?’

The Captain smiled. 'Nay; we set out to be pirate catchers, but our plan miscarried, as you may perceive,' he said whimsically.

'Pirate catchers? Zounds! I never heard tell of such a thing.'

'No? Ah well, maybe there are few about,' went on the Captain. 'When justice fails, honest mariners must look after themselves.'

'And where did justice fail you, may I ask?'

'At Port Royal, where His Majesty's trusted servants are in the pay of the greatest scoundrel who ever trod a deck—Rochelle. 'Tis a long story how it came about, but we decided to attempt what justice failed to do, which was no less than to lay Rochelle by the heels. We nearly succeeded, too—but there, what need to weary you with our troubles? Should it ever be your fortune to reach England again, or any other British port where His Majesty's law is administered by honest men, I pray that you will denounce the acting Governor at Port Royal, and his minions, that other men may not suffer at his hands as we have.'

The Captain broke off and glanced upward as there came shouts and a trampling on the deck.

'What is that noise?' asked the baronet.

'Methinks it is the Butcher arriving,' answered the Captain.

'What sort of fellow is he?'

' 'Twould be better not to ask, although, unless my guess is off the mark, you'll be seeing him face to face soon enough,' returned the Captain. He turned to the others. ' 'Tis courage to meet our fates, not hope, that will serve us now,' he said quietly. 'We cannot blame ourselves for what has happened. We did our best, and more than that no man may do. 'Tis my plan to taunt the Butcher so that maybe in his rage he will strike us dead; his other tricks, of which we all have heard, I'd rather not encounter if they can be avoided. Methinks I left some articles of my wardrobe in the locker yonder; if so, I have a mind to make myself presentable to meet the villain.' The Captain crossed over to the locker he had indicated and took out some garments.

There was a great noise of shouting above, and a moment later heavy footsteps sounded on the companion-way.

The Captain turned to Sir Alexander. 'Since your life has been spared till now, maybe they'll not include you in our company, so take no heed of what I say before the Butcher. You see, as I told you, we tried to bring him to book, and in the attempt his son was slain. Of this he is well aware, so as he slays those whom he does not know out of mere wantonness, you may guess what sort of mercy we are like to get. I bid you good-day, sir.'

‘If I live you shall not go unavenged, sir,’ Sir Alexander promised, with an optimism that was hardly justified.

At that moment the door was flung open and Rochelle stood on the threshold. A strange silence fell, a silence in which the soft caress of the wavelets on the hull could be distinctly heard. Behind the Butcher stood Archer. Behind the pair were the curious faces of the crowding pirates.

For a full minute the Butcher did not speak. It almost seemed that his burning rage was such that he was incapable of speech. With his brows drawn down, his chin thrust forward, and his clothes all torn and plastered with mud, he made a terrifying spectacle. Yet the Captain met his gaze squarely, a faint smile of disdain, almost insolence, on his lips.

The Butcher’s breath came faster. His bloodshot eyes narrowed. ‘Bring them on deck,’ he said in a slow, deliberate voice, so soft that it was little more than a whisper.

‘All of ’em?’ asked Archer.

‘Yes, you fool,’ roared Rochelle, as though his pent-up temper had burst all restraint.

Archer mumbled an apology, while the pirates poured into the room, and laying rough hands on the prisoners, began to drag them out.

‘Who’s that?’ asked Rochelle, pointing to Sir Alexander Frisby.

‘He was on a ship we took. I had a mind to——’

‘Was he with these others?’

‘No.’

‘Then leave him where he is; I’ll attend to him later on.’

Mark threw a pathetic glance at his father, who was still so weak and ill as to be hardly aware of what was happening. Mark’s predominating sensation at that moment was one of bitter disappointment that all his efforts had been in vain, when he had been so near to success.

Another minute and the prisoners stood blinking in the bright sunlight, near the mainmast, under a sky of azure blue. Their hands were quickly tied behind their backs.

Rochelle tore the remnants of his shirt from his body and flung it on the deck, so that his broad, hairy torso was exposed. He looked at Ben with brooding eyes in which there was more than a suspicion of madness. ‘I’ll start with you first,’ he said harshly. ‘The others will then get a chance to see what’s in store for them.’

The old man let out a wail of terror. ‘No, not me,’ he cried. ‘Not me! I’ll do anything you like.’

‘Ay, that you will,’ grated Rochelle with a vicious oath. ‘Nail him to the mast.’

A sailor stepped forward with a piece of rope in his hands, but he shrank back as Rochelle turned on him in a fury. ‘I said nail him, not tie him,’ he screamed.

‘No, no! Not that!’ pleaded Ben. Then, with the strength of terror, he tore himself free from his guards, and in a quick rush reached the rail. His hands were tied behind his back but he did not hesitate. Straight down into the blue sea he leapt.

But his hope of a speedy death was not fulfilled. Under a stream of lurid curses from Rochelle, several sailors tumbled into the boat that was moored astern and dragged the limp form from the water, and carrying it back to the deck, flung it, dripping, at the feet of the Butcher. The old man lay still, moaning feebly.

‘So you like the water best, do you?’ sneered Rochelle. ‘Well, the water it shall be. No man ever said I was unobliging, not me. We’ll try a little keel-’auling first.’

Mark strained forward, panting with rage. ‘You foul hound!’ he got out, and then a sailor struck him in the mouth.

Rochelle picked up a piece of rope, and, balancing it in his hand as if to judge the distance, advanced slowly upon Mark, who, seeing what was coming, shrank from the impending blow. Before it could fall, Ben, with surprising alacrity, had leapt to his feet and rushed again to the rail. Several sailors dashed to seize him, but they were too late. The old man leapt outwards and downwards. An instant later a wild scream rang through the air, and the wheeling gulls that sailed languidly round the ship soared higher.

An excited babble of conversation rose from the pirates who had rushed to the place from where the old man had jumped, and Mark caught the word ‘Shark’.

‘A shark’s got ’im,’ called one of them to Rochelle.

Archer ran forward to confirm this, while the Butcher surveyed the surviving prisoners malevolently. His glowering eyes switched to the sailors guarding them. Then he pointed at Mark. ‘Bring ’im ’ere,’ he ordered.

Mark, sick with grief at the fate that had overtaken the old sailor, was dragged forward. Again Rochelle swung the rope through the air. Simultaneously a voice called out, and at the words the curling rope dropped limply.

‘Avast there, Butcher Rochelle,’ cried the voice, and all eyes switched to the place whence it came.

Mark, looking with the rest, beheld a most extraordinary sight. At the head of the companion-way that led to the *Rose's* powder-hold stood a man whom he recognized at once. It was Will Greenaway. Under his left arm he carried a small barrel of gunpowder, from the top of which the glistening black grains spilled out like water, and splashed about the deck. But that was not all. In his right hand he held a torch of tarred rope, which he brandished, and sometimes swung it so low that it nearly brushed the powder.

At the sight of the gunpowder and the torch, and the black trail that led back into the hold, the pirates shrank back, some instinctively raising their arms to shield their eyes. Even Rochelle's face changed colour as he took a quick pace backward.

HOW WILL GREENAWAY HELD THE BOARD

CHAPTER XVII

HOW WILL GREENAWAY HELD THE BOARD

MARK could only stare in petrified amazement as Will halted at the top of the companion steps and there stood blinking like an owl as though the bright sunlight worried his eyes. He swayed unsteadily from side to side, and all the time the powder trickled out of the barrel and formed in little heaps about his feet. Sometimes he nearly dropped the barrel, and once or twice the blazing torch appeared almost to touch the powder. And as he stood there looking around the circle of terrified faces watching him, a foolish grin spread over his face.

‘It’s Will Greenaway,’ cried several voices excitedly.

With absurd deliberation, Will stood the barrel on the powder which had been spilled, seated himself on it, and regarded the company with a self-conscious smirk. And it was not until then that Mark began to suspect the truth. Will was drunk—or had, at least, been drinking. Rochelle evidently realized this, too, for he yelled a warning at him.

‘Take heed, you fool,’ he shouted. ‘If you touch the powder with that torch you’ll blow the ship up.’

Will’s smile became broader. ‘Blow ship up,’ he repeated foolishly. With an unsteady finger he pointed to the powder that lay about his feet. ‘Ay,’ he said. ‘The train goes right down into the hold. If one goes, all goes—hic.’ He raised a wavering hand towards a pirate who was levelling a pistol. ‘You shoot and I drop torch—hic. I’ll make a bigger bang than you—ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!’ He roared with laughter at his own joke.

‘Put that pistol down, you fool,’ snarled Rochelle to the pirate who held it. ‘Do you want to blow the ship up?’

By this time Mark had recovered sufficiently from shock to be able to take an intelligent interest in what was going on. What he could not understand, however, was Will’s condition, for he knew that in the ordinary way he was a most abstemious man. In fact, he was one of the few sailors he had met who did not drink rum regularly. What, then, had come over him?

Mark looked at the Captain, but the Captain, with a peculiar smile on his face, was staring at Will, who, with ridiculous gravity, was addressing Rochelle. As for Rochelle, he could do no more than eye the new-comer with a fixed expression of something between fear and fury. He could do

nothing, and he evidently had the wit to realize it, knowing, as every one else on the deck knew, that should the smoking torch touch the powder the *Rose* and every one in her would be blown sky-high. Had Will been sober the situation might have been regarded in a different light, but as it was he was behaving in a manner which no sober man would contemplate. What was more, he appeared to be enjoying it. It is no use arguing with a drunken man, as Rochelle was well aware, and in his impotent rage he looked nearly as foolish as Will.

‘Captain Rochelle, I hate you,’ said Will severely, rocking on the powder barrel.

‘Look what you’re at, you blistering fool,’ cried Rochelle, flinching. ‘You’ll be over in a minute. Put that torch out before you blow yourself to smithereens.’

Will only shook his head knowingly. ‘Another word from you, Captain Rochelle, and you’ll hear the biggest bang you ever heard in your life,’ he declared with ludicrous earnestness.

‘Easy there, you lubber,’ roared Rochelle, standing first on one foot and then on the other in his agitation, while several of the pirates began to edge farther away. Some, who were out of Rochelle’s view, ran aft, and stood on the rail ready to jump overboard should the powder train be fired, either deliberately or—what seemed more likely—by accident.

In desperation Rochelle turned to the Captain. ‘Tell the fool to put that torch out,’ he ordered.

‘Not I,’ answered the Captain lightly.

‘Captain Rochelle, if you were alone on this ship I’d blow you over the moon, because I hate you—hate you,’ declared Will again. ‘I never hated any one so much as I hate you. What you doing with Captain Champion’s ship? You let him go. I’ve got something to tell him. You hear what I say?’ he demanded belligerently. ‘I’ve got to talk to him.’

Rochelle, his fists opening and closing, took a quick pace forward as though contemplating a rush, but he stopped suddenly as Will almost fell off the barrel, coming within an ace of dropping the torch.

‘Stop!’ he shouted. ‘One more step and up she goes.’

Again Mark looked at the Captain. Try as he would, he could think of no way that Will could help them. The present ridiculous position could not go on indefinitely, that was certain.

‘Will!’ called the Captain sharply.

‘Ay, ay, sir,’ was the prompt answer.

‘Can ye hear what I’m saying?’

‘Ay, I can hear, sir.’

‘Then tell Rochelle to cut us loose,’ ordered the Captain. ‘If he refuses, start counting up to ten. If he does not loose us at the word ten, drop the torch into the powder, and we’ll all go to Davy Jones together.’

Mark suspected that he knew the reason for the Captain’s urgent order. Will’s torch was burning low, and in a few minutes it would burn out—that is, if he did not drop it accidentally into the powder when it began to burn his fingers.

Will turned a maudlin eye on Rochelle. ‘You heard that?’ he said, his manner changing suddenly to one of exaggerated aggressiveness, as a drunken man’s often will. ‘When I have counted up to ten—you know what. One . . . two . . .’

Rochelle hesitated, as well he might, for no man ever found himself in a more exasperating quandary. One thing was certain, however, and he evidently realized it. Unless he released the prisoners within a few seconds the ship would be blown up. It maybe occurred to him that even if he released them he would have no difficulty in capturing them again when the fool sitting amongst the gunpowder had been restrained. If so, it was a reasonable supposition. Mark was thinking on similar lines. He could not see how being released was going to help them. They would not be able to leave the ship with Will still on board, yet the moment he quitted his dictatorial position they would all be seized again.

By the time Will had counted up to eight the ropes that bound the prisoners’ wrists had been cut, and they hastened to join Will at the head of the companion-way. Rochelle did not attempt to stop them. Possibly he was wondering, like Mark, how this could benefit them.

The Captain took the torch from Will’s hands and swept it aside just as the glowing end fell off. Another instant and it would have fallen on the powder, although Will appeared to be quite unaware of it. Even the Captain was pale as he brought his heel down on the ember that glowed within six inches of the powder. Then he swung round and faced Rochelle and his pirates.

‘Over the side, all of you,’ he cried. ‘I’ve no mind to be a victim of your nasty habits, Rochelle, so you’ll believe me, I trust, when I promise you, on my honour, that rather than that should happen, I will do what Will Greenaway threatened to do, and send the lot of you sky-high, though we go with you. You can go by the board, or by the boat, as you please, for when

this torch burns so low that I can no longer hold it, I shall drop it on the powder.'

Whether or not the pirate would have obeyed this order it is not possible to say, for at that moment a new and entirely unexpected development put a different complexion on everything. There was a wild cry of 'Sail-ho' from a man standing in the ratlines, and friends and foe alike by mutual agreement called a truce while they looked to see who the new arrival could be.

One second was enough to inform every one on board of the disconcerting truth. Round the headland, not a quarter of a mile away, the fresh morning breeze filling her majestic canvas, came a Spanish galleon, a double row of gaping muzzles projecting from her side.

For a few moments a hush hung over the *Rose* as pirates and prisoners strove to grasp the significance of the alarming truth; then came panic, and an instant later a rush for the boats. In vain Rochelle tried to rally his men, and some did, indeed, hang back, but the long-boat was packed as it sped towards the shore, and a fair number of pirates, risking the sharks, jumped overboard and began to swim. Rochelle raved like a madman, but there was little he could do. With the ship fast at anchor, no sail set, no guns ready for action, and every one in a panic, the *Rose* could not but fall an easy victim to the towering Spaniard, which, apart from every other advantage, carried double the *Rose's* weight in metal.

The Captain caught Mark's eye as though the situation was too much for him; which, indeed, it was, for not to fight was to fall into the hands of the Spaniards, while should they join in the general flight, and find themselves ashore with the pirates, their fate was just as certain. Meanwhile, the Spaniard bore down on the helpless *Rose*.

'Get yourself a weapon,' the Captain told Mark quietly, and Mark picked up one of the several cutlasses that lay about the deck where they had been cast away by the pirates who had sought safety on land. 'We will let Rochelle fight his own battle,' went on the Captain, 'after which we will defend ourselves against all comers.' He flung aside the torch which had now served its purpose, and turned to Will, who was still sitting on the barrel in a sort of daze. 'Pull yourself together, man,' he said harshly.

The sails of the Spaniard swept between the slanting rays of the sun and the *Rose*, the drifting shadow darkening the *Rose's* deck; a moment later, following a single gun, her whole side leapt into flame.

A tempest of shot, splinters, cut rigging and other debris hurtled across the *Rose's* deck, and a dozen men went down, including Archer, whose head

had been shorn from his shoulders by a round-shot.

The Spaniard came about, and again the thunder of her guns rolled out. It was enough to decide those of the pirates who were hesitating. Several more of them jumped overboard and struck out for the shore, which was now very close; for the *Rose* was drifting, some one evidently having cut her hawser, either for that very purpose, or in a desperate hope of getting the ship under sail. Rochelle and perhaps a score of men remained, although they must have known that they were doomed. Rochelle did indeed run to the rail and look over the side, but all the boats had gone, and several dark shapes in the water warned him that it was no time to swim, if such was his intention.

In a vague sort of way Mark wondered what had become of Pallanca, for he had not seen him since Rochelle's return; but he had little time to ponder this problem, for, with a roar of rage, the Butcher raised his cutlass and bore down on the little party as though determined, since all was lost, not to be denied his revenge.

'Back to back and fight it out,' yelled the Captain, and a moment later steel clashed against steel.

Two or three more of Rochelle's men, seeing the Spaniard closing in for boarding, and evidently feeling unwilling to die while a hope of life remained, threw down their weapons and disappeared aft, but Rochelle and the others came on.

Mark saw little of the fight, for he was too occupied with defending himself, cutting and thrusting with the abandon of despair. Once or twice he was vaguely conscious of Pierro's huge black form towering over him as the negro swung his cutlass like a flail. Stepping back to avoid a blow, Mark slipped and went down, and from that position thrust viciously at the legs in front of him. He saw that his father was doing the same thing. Then there came a ringing cheer; the legs seemed to withdraw and he scrambled to his feet.

Brushing his hair from his eyes, he looked about wildly, conscious that something strange had happened. Neither Rochelle nor the other pirates were in front of him; they were retreating before a surging wave of newcomers. Spaniards? Mark shook his head and looked again, for he had never seen Spaniards dressed like the men who had boarded them. He caught sight of one or two faces that seemed oddly familiar. Then he saw Dan bearing down on Rochelle like a whirlwind. The thing became disjointed, like a dream. The *Rose's* old crew were there . . . where had they come from? Where were the Spaniards? . . .

He was no longer being attacked, so he sat down weakly on the powder-barrel from which Will Greenaway had now disappeared, and tried to work out what was happening. Pierro and the Captain were still fighting on different parts of the deck, but they paused when the few surviving pirates jumped over the rail. He saw Dan appear from behind the mainmast dragging a limp figure by the hair; he recognized it for Rochelle. In fascinated horror he saw Dan's cutlass go up, but the Captain ran in and caught Dan's arm before the blow could fall. He saw that the galleon was lashed to the *Rose's* side, and the truth at last began to penetrate his bewildered brain. The *Rose's* crew must have been aboard the Spaniard, and he regarded the vessel more closely. In doing so a movement beyond it caught his eye, and starting up, he saw two more ships sailing into the creek.

Running to the Captain's side he caught his arm. 'Look!' he said, pointing seaward.

The Captain broke off in what he was saying to Dan and his eyes followed Mark's outstretched finger. 'Sdeath!' he muttered. 'Methinks every ship on the sea must have decided to come to Chagraw Creek to-day. What are they, Dan? They look like men-of-war.'

'Sure and begorra, and it's frigates they are,' answered Dan.

CAPTAIN PARSONS COMES ABOARD

CAPTAIN PARSONS COMES ABOARD

‘FAITH, and they come at a right good moment,’ declared the Captain. ‘In these last few hours things have moved a deal too fast for my poor wits. How fares the battle, Dan? Are there any pirates left aboard?’

‘None, save one—Rochelle, whose head would now be off his body but that you saw fit to catch my stroke,’ growled Dan.

‘He’ll get his deserts in due course,’ observed the Captain.

‘Then why delay?’ protested Dan, with sound argument. ‘See what came of letting Archer go——’

‘Never mind that now,’ broke in the Captain crisply. ‘Why did ye leave the *Rose*? There are several things I would like explained.’

‘Sure, your honour,’ returned Dan, looking down at the point of his cutlass, rather shame-faced. And there, on the blood-stained deck, he told the weary travellers of how he had come to leave the ship.

After the Captain’s departure, he had, it transpired, taken a scouting party along the coast, in the long-boat, to see what was happening at the creek. From this expedition he had learned that a single Spanish ship lay in the offing, with only a skeleton guard on board. The Spaniards had evidently considered their pursuit party to be more than a match for Rochelle; moreover, since Puerto Novo had been warned of what was happening, reinforcements were expected from that direction. So much he had learned from a prisoner.

With only a few Spaniards on the galleon, and not a great number guarding the fort on shore, Dan had decided that it would be a simple matter to take the Spanish ship, and thus command the situation whoever came down the river first—the Captain, the pirates, or the Spaniards. And the Captain, here breaking in on Dan’s story, was forced to admit that there was much to recommend the plan.

Anyway, Dan had forthwith proceeded to put it into action; so leaving only one or two men on the *Rose*, he had put the others into the boats, and taking the galleon by surprise under cover of darkness had captured her even more easily than he had anticipated. With the situation now in his hands—as he supposed—he had then decided to bring the galleon down to where the *Rose* lay, with the object of putting a crew on both vessels, and then patrolling the coast.

At that time he had no means of knowing that, shortly after he had left the *Rose*, Archer, creeping up the coast in the opposite direction in a damaged vessel, had come upon her, and taken her just as easily as he had taken the galleon. Finding the *Rose* in much better condition than his own ship, Archer had transferred everything to her, and then scuttled his own vessel in the cove. This done, he continued on his way to the creek.

By this time Dan was bringing the galleon down the coast. Each unaware of the proximity of the other, they had passed in the night, with the result that when Archer arrived at the creek he found it deserted, and when Dan reached the cove he was stupefied to discover that the *Rose* had disappeared. Sending a boat ashore to try to solve the mystery, he was fortunate enough to pick up one of the *Rose*'s crew, a sailor who, when he saw that the ship was lost, had jumped overboard and managed to reach the shore, where he had hidden in the forest. From this man Dan had learned what had happened to the *Rose*. Overcome by anger and remorse, he had set off in pursuit of her, and came upon her at dawn, in the creek, as we have seen. Even so, it was not until he was at very close quarters that he had seen the Captain and Mark on her, whereupon he had held his fire and boarded her, with what result we know. Thus was Dan's side of the story explained.

Will Greenaway, on being questioned, had an even more simple story to tell, one that soon explained his timely appearance. He had been one of the hands left on the *Rose*, and he described in abject tones how Archer had taken them completely by surprise. Greenaway had been in the powder hold when the attack was made, and when he saw that the ship was lost he had rushed back with the object of blowing her up. In the hold, however, he had lost his nerve, and instead of firing the powder had hidden behind a barrel in the hope of finding a chance to escape later on. Owing to the heat he had been greatly distressed by thirst, and, searching about, was overjoyed to find a bottle from which he drank, not caring much what it contained so long as it was liquid. Thereafter he had gone to sleep—which was not surprising—and the next thing he remembered was the sound of voices overhead. Recognizing Rochelle's, he had risked a peep to see what was going on, thus learning, to his horror, that Captain Champion and the others were prisoners. In the circumstances he had acted as he had been guided by his befuddled wits, which, as it turned out, served the party well.

While these conversations had been taking place the two frigates had been drawing into the creek, and now both dropped boats that came speeding towards the *Rose* and the Spanish ship, which still lay in close embrace. It may seem strange that not one of the party on the *Rose*'s deck apprehended danger from the new-comers. Perhaps it was because of the

terrible ordeal they had undergone. Be that as it may, as the boats pulled towards them their sensations were more those of relief than anything else. Colonel Lawson knew nothing of the happenings at Port Royal, of course, but even if he had been aware of them it is not unlikely that he would have felt the same.

The sailors, armed to the teeth, boarded the *Rose* from both sides, and it was not until the Captain perceived that their manner was definitely hostile that he felt his first twinge of uneasiness. The sailors formed a bristling circle round the little party on the *Rose*'s deck, while others herded the crew forward under their muskets. A grizzled lieutenant stepped forward.

'Well, so we have run you down at last,' said he with a sneer.

'Run us down? I don't understand,' answered the Captain.

'You will presently,' nodded the other, and at a word of command a quartermaster stepped forward with several pairs of handcuffs, which he proceeded to lock on the wrists of the bewildered prisoners.

There was a stir forward as a fresh party came over the side, and another officer strode up to the group. 'My name is Captain Parsons,' he announced harshly, as he took a sheet of paper from his pocket. 'Answer your names. Colonel Lawson?'

'That is my name,' answered the Colonel, weakly; he was sitting on the deck leaning back against the foot of the mizzen mast.

'Mark Lawson?'

'Here,' answered Mark.

'Captain John Champion?'

'At your service,' bowed the Captain.

'I have here,' went on the naval officer, in an arrogant voice, after a glance at the rest of the party, 'a warrant for your arrest on a charge of piracy on the high seas. And, furthermore, I am authorized to deal with you summarily should I take you on the sea. This I have done, and I see no reason why I should not execute the warrant.'

'But I don't understand,' muttered the Captain, conscious for the first time of the peril in which they stood.

'No?' sneered Captain Parsons. 'Is it necessary for me to make my meaning plainer? You have been taken in the act of piracy. You know the punishment. Have you anything to say why I should not execute my authority here and now, and hang you?'

'Taken in the act of piracy?' exclaimed the Captain. 'Taken in the act of exterminating pirates, you mean, surely?' He nodded towards the

unconscious form of Rochelle, still lying where it had been dropped by Dan. ‘That man is Butcher Rochelle—maybe ye’ve heard of him?’ he went on sarcastically. ‘There lies Nicholas Archer, one of his captains. Benito Pallanca, Rochelle’s other captain, must be ashore somewhere, for ’tis the truth that I do not know what has become of him, although he was with Rochelle till recently.’

‘When thieves fall out ’tis time for honest men to step in,’ quoted the naval officer glibly. ‘We caught you fairly in the act. That you were fighting amongst yourselves is of little consequence.’

‘But upon my life this is outrageous,’ cried the Captain indignantly. ‘My crew has done what not one of you could do, though you’ve had years to do it in—rid the seas of the murdering villain Rochelle.’

‘He shall hang with you,’ promised the naval officer casually.

‘Whence comes this warrant?’ asked the Captain coldly, a suspicion forming suddenly in his mind.

‘You are within your rights to ask that,’ conceded the naval officer. ‘It carries the signatures of the justices at Port Royal.’

‘The justices, did you say?’ sneered the Captain. ‘They are in league with Rochelle, which is why we set out to lay the villain by the heels. Take him back to Port Royal, and you’ll see whether they will hang him. As for myself and my crew, I demand that we be taken to Kingston, or Georgetown, to stand our trial, when I will soon find witnesses to prove whether I am a pirate or not.’

‘Demand? When I sail into Port Royal you’ll be hanging from my yard-arm.’

The Captain ran his eyes over his crew, who were watching the proceedings anxiously, and then over the soldiers and sailors who had come aboard from the two frigates. All told, his own crew numbered less than fifty men. The others were at least two hundred. Even so he would have fought, had he been free and armed. Bitterly he regretted the ease with which he had allowed them all to be taken.

‘Ho, there, some of you, bring ropes,’ ordered the naval officer.

Colonel Lawson staggered to his feet and pushed his way to the front. ‘What is this I hear?’ he cried in a tremulous voice. ‘Did some one call me a pirate? How dare you say such a thing, sir? I was on a trading voyage in my ship when I was taken by Rochelle. Not a man of my crew was left alive. I was——’

‘Pipe down, man, that’s enough. Lies will not save you,’ broke in the naval officer.

‘What he says is true, every word of it,’ declared the Captain, white-faced with anger and indignation. ‘We have just rescued him from Rochelle’s hands, and if you had the wit to look around you would see plenty of proof of that.’

‘Then answer me this. Whence came this Spanish ship? Who took it?’

‘Sure, and I did; and phwat if I did?’ spat Dan.

‘What is that but piracy?’

‘’Tis the first time I’ve heard it said that taking a Spanish ship is piracy,’ observed the Captain.

‘’Twill be the last time, too, I make no doubt.’

‘Yet if you will take us to Kingston for fair trial we can prove every word we say,’ declared the Captain desperately. ‘Even a pirate should be given a trial.’

‘Ha, you admit you are pirates?’

‘I do not. We put to sea to take pirates, which we have done, as you may see if you will look about you.’

‘According to the warrant you put to sea to save your necks from the gallows at Port Royal, and that’s enough for me,’ murmured the naval officer.

‘Yet I protest that the warrant is false, and that the witnesses at Port Royal were false witnesses, being in league with Rochelle——’

‘Cease, man. This has gone on long enough. Bring the ropes forward, and let us make an end.’

Mark looked at the Captain appealingly. ‘Is there nothing we can do?’

‘Nothing, with this stubborn fool,’ grated the Captain. ‘He has made up his mind to hang us, and nothing will put it from his head.’

‘So it would seem,’ agreed Mark bitterly.

A sailor suddenly pushed through the crowded ranks, and running up to the naval officer said something that the others could not catch.

The officer looked up with a triumphant gleam in his eyes. ‘Whose ship is this?’ he asked.

‘Mine,’ returned the Captain—‘at least, I sail it as captain for Colonel Lawson,’ he added.

‘Then you are condemned out of your own mouth,’ declared the naval officer, ‘for there is plunder in your hold that was taken from more ships than one, and a black flag in the locker.’

The Captain shrugged his shoulders. He realized that it was futile to tell the truth and to say that the plunder had been put in his ship by Archer. If the naval officer would not believe what he had already said, which was so obviously the truth, it was unlikely that he would believe that. So he said no more.

Seeing that nothing they could say would have any effect, the prisoners stood silent while nooses were made in the ropes. They were then led under the yard-arm, over which the ropes were thrown, and the nooses tightened about their necks.

A hush fell as the naval officer took a small prayer-book from his pocket and began turning over the pages. He was still looking for the place he sought when from somewhere—no one appeared to know quite where—came a hail. A voice shouted, and every word could be distinctly heard. ‘You scoundrels, you shall hang for this.’

The sailors who were holding the ropes looked at each other, smiling. The naval officer’s eyes met the Captain’s.

‘Ha, so there’s another one, is there? We’ll attend to him later.’

‘Villains, you shall hang for this,’ came the voice again, seeming to come from the side of the ship.

‘Stop that man shouting, one of you,’ snarled the naval officer furiously. He took out his warrant again and ran his finger down what was evidently a list of names. ‘Who is it below?’ he asked the Captain.

‘Faith, methinks it must be poor old Sir Alexander Frisby,’ answered the Captain. ‘Shame on me for forgetting all about him.’

The naval officer started. ‘*What* name did you say?’

‘Sir Alexander Frisby—so he told me a while ago, when we were in each other’s company.’

Captain Parsons pointed a quivering finger at the Captain. ‘You villain!’ he cried. ‘You’d dare to lay hands on Sir Alexander’s person, would you? Make prisoners of your betters, eh? By the Lord Harry, he shall have the pleasure of watching you dance a measure at a rope’s end. Quartermaster!’

An old sailor sprang forward. ‘Ay, ay, sir.’

‘Go and ask Sir Alexander to step on deck.’

‘He will be only too glad——’ began the Captain, during the delay, but the naval officer cut him short.

‘Silence!’ he roared. ‘Speak when I give you leave, sirrah.’

At that moment the baronet’s face appeared at the head of the companion-way; it was crimson with rage and exertion. There was a splash

of blood on his forehead, for a shot from the Spanish ship had struck the cabin in which he was confined, and, in tearing a hole through the timbers, had smothered him with splinters. As it transpired subsequently, it was through this hole made by the shot that he had cried for help when he had observed the frigates sailing into the creek, although it was some time before any one heard him.

He marched straight across the deck to where Captain Parsons was standing at attention, a smile of welcome on his face. He is not to be blamed if he was already congratulating himself on the promotion that would, he felt sure, come his way, when the Admiralty heard of his notable capture. But the smile faded with ludicrous suddenness when the baronet addressed him.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he demanded furiously. ‘Did you not hear me calling? A shot knocks a hole in the side of the ship not a yard from my head, and there I am, with two frigates within hail and not a soul to come to my aid.’ His expression changed as he swung round and stared at the prisoners still standing under the yard-arm with ropes about their necks. ‘Fore heaven! What is going on here?’ he demanded.

‘We are hanging a nest of pirates, sir, saving your presence,’ explained the naval officer.

‘Captain Parsons insists that we are pirates,’ said the Captain casually. ‘Be advised to keep a civil tongue in your head, sir, or he’s like to hang you, too.’

Sir Alexander’s face turned purple. ‘*What?*’ he croaked, choking in his fury. ‘Hang me for a pirate? *Me*, the new Governor of the West Indies?’

RETRIBUTION AT LAST

RETRIBUTION AT LAST

A STRANGE silence followed this unexpected statement, a silence broken only by the swish of a passing seagull's wings.

The Captain was the first to speak. 'Odd's my life, sir,' he said with a funny little grimace. 'Then it's right glad I am to see you, for you couldn't have arrived at a more opportune moment. The cravat which Captain Parsons has set about my neck is somewhat rougher than the one to which I am accustomed.'

'Oddsfish! So I imagine.' Sir Alexander Frisby looked at Captain Parsons askance. 'Why are you hanging these men?' he asked.

'Because they are pirates, sir.'

'Fiddlesticks! Whence came that idea?'

The naval officer looked uncomfortable. 'I have a warrant, sir, and they are named on it.'

'Would you hang a man on the strength of a scrap of paper, without a trial?'

The naval officer's embarrassment became more apparent.

'What is your name, sir?' the baronet demanded.

'Captain Parsons, sir.'

'Parsons—Parsons? Egad! Then you are the very officer who was supposed to meet and escort my ship. Three ships were to be sent, if I mistake not, though I see but two.'

''Tis true, sir,' admitted the naval officer. 'The *Seahawk*, which lost us last night, is, I see, coming in now.'

All eyes turned seaward to where the third frigate was tacking into the creek.

'*Seahawk*, did you say?' cried the Captain. 'Then, if Lieutenant Markham is still aboard her, we should soon have enough proof to convince even Captain Parsons of our innocence.'

'How so?' the naval officer was startled into answering.

'Because it is not long since I and my company had the pleasure of driving off a pirate—Master Archer, who lies there dead upon the deck—who was like to have sunk him. Between us we took the pirate, and the last I saw of Archer he was in Lieutenant Markham's custody.'

‘Then he soon secured his freedom, for he was captain of the very ship that took me,’ declared the baronet.

‘Any pirate could secure his freedom who lined the pockets of those at Port Royal with gold,’ observed the Captain in a voice that had an edge on it.

The baronet threw him a quick glance. ‘You promise to be interesting, sir,’ he murmured drily. Then, turning to Captain Parsons, ‘Release these men,’ he ordered. ‘Methinks they have a tale to tell, and I would like to hear it.’

By the time the ropes were removed, and the crew set free to wander about the deck, Lieutenant Markham had clambered over the *Rose*’s side. He nodded a friendly greeting to the Captain. ‘Good-day to you, sir,’ he called cheerfully. ‘What fortune brings you here?’

‘An evil fortune you’d ha’ thought, had you been here an hour ago,’ replied the Captain. ‘Your Fleet-Captain was about to hang us for pirates.’

‘Pirates!’ cried the Lieutenant aghast, looking at Captain Parsons questioningly. ‘But this, sir, is the gentleman who saved me and my ship from the pirates when we were in distress. I made a full report of the matter at Port Royal,’ added the lieutenant.

‘Did you honour us by mentioning our names?’ inquired the Captain.

‘For sure I did.’

‘Did Sir Samuel Menzies put *that* on the warrant, or mention it to you?’ the Captain asked Parsons slyly.

‘No, I have heard no word of it.’

‘For sure you didn’t,’ returned the Captain.

‘But why are we talking here?’ put in Sir Alexander. ‘Have you a bottle of wine below, Captain Champion? My throat is as dry as a lime-kiln.’

‘If the pirates have not drunk it all, sir,’ the Captain told him.

‘Then let us below and hear this tale of yours. To tell the truth, rumours that all was not well at Port Royal have already reached the king, which is why he honoured me by sending me out to look into the matter. ’Twould seem I’ve made a fortunate beginning.’

The Captain led the way below, where, seated round the table in the poop cabin, he told his story from the beginning, omitting nothing, and dwelling particularly on the state of affairs at Port Royal.

The Governor’s brow was black when he had finished; he brought his fist down on the table with a crash that made the glasses jump. ‘Oddsfish! Captain Parsons,’ he cried, ‘it seems that your ropes will be needed after

all.' Then he turned to the Captain. 'Yet 'tis one thing to make a charge and another to prove it,' he observed, doubtfully. 'How shall we find proof to set the guilt on these conspirators?'

'I have a plan that would make you, sir, and the officers present, witnesses, and your testimony would not be doubted.'

'How so?'

The Captain leaned forward and spoke earnestly at some length.

When he had finished the Governor once more thumped the table. 'Sdeath, that's it,' he cried. 'If the plan succeeds, why, then they condemn themselves. Let us under way, for already I have been too long absent from my post. To Port Royal, then, and the *Rose* shall lead the way.'

Ten days later, having been favoured by fair winds, the *Rose* dropped anchor off the well-remembered Palisadoes, but out of range of the fort, and the Captain at once set about the execution of his plan. There was little shipping at the anchorage, and since the three frigates had dawdled far behind the *Rose*, the navy was not represented.

The Captain joined Dan on the after-deck, and handed him a letter. 'You know what you are to do, Dan?' he said quietly. 'Speak as I told ye, but let not your tongue run away with your prudence.'

'Sure, your honour,' grinned Dan, and a minute or two later was being rowed towards the shore.

The Captain waited, speaking from time to time to Mark and his father, who had joined him at the rail.

It was nearly two hours before they saw the long-boat coming back. Dan was no longer alone. In the boat with him were three resplendent figures, Sir Samuel Menzies, the acting Governor, Jacob Lechmere, the Admiralty Judge, and Spencer Huggins, the Provost-Marshal. In their wake came three more boats packed with marines.

'They take no chances for their safety,' observed the Captain grimly. 'Though 'tis quite understandable,' he added thoughtfully. 'Say naught, but leave the speech-making to me.'

The Captain stood by the rail to receive his visitors, who did not come aboard, however, until an escort of marines had lined the ship's side.

The Captain bowed low. 'Good-day to you, gentlemen,' he said pleasantly.

The three conspirators regarded the Captain suspiciously for a moment.

'Is it true what your quartermaster fellow tells us?' asked the acting Governor at last, taking a pinch of snuff.

‘ ’Tis not a matter to be discussed on the open deck, methinks,’ observed the Captain quietly. ‘If you’ll honour my poor cabin, gentlemen . . .’

‘What proof have we that treachery is not intended?’

The Captain shrugged his shoulders and waved towards the marines. ‘In all conscience, sirs, ye seem to have taken possession of my ship. I’ll send my crew ashore, if ’twill make you any more comfortable.’

‘Maybe it is not necessary,’ said Jacob Lechmere, condescendingly. ‘Lead the way to the cabin—and no tricks, my man, or ’twill be the worse for you.’

They followed the Captain into the large poop cabin. They glanced around quickly as they entered, but there was no one there. Only Mark and his father followed them in, closing the door behind them.

‘Now, what of this treasure?’ asked Sir Samuel Menzies tersely. ‘For your own sake ’tis to be hoped that you have not lied to us.’

‘Before we speak of treasure, there is, methinks, the little matter of terms to be arranged,’ said the Captain smoothly, looking from one to the other. ‘Since I last saw you I have met, and spoken with, Gabriel Rochelle. I suggest that the same terms should apply.’

‘Ten per cent. for each of us,’ declared Spencer Huggins. ‘Those are our terms with him.’

‘Indeed, I thought ’twas five per cent. since there are three of you.’

‘Five per cent., yes, if we are but to overlook your actions, but ten per cent. if we are to guarantee your release should you be taken, because the risk is greater,’ declared Sir Samuel.

‘Very well,’ agreed the Captain. ‘But let us be quite clear on the point. ’Tis true that I pay five per cent., the same as Rochelle——’

‘Ten per cent.,’ interrupted Sir Samuel harshly. ‘Ten per cent. to each of us is the share that Rochelle pays us, and, sink me, he has had more than his money’s worth, as you’ll agree, or by now he’d be a-drying in the sun.’

‘What do ye do with the evidence that is laid against him? I ask because the same may be my case.’

‘It is destroyed—every word of it,’ declared Sir Samuel. ‘We hold nothing against Rochelle, though we have had evidence enough brought in to hang him a dozen times. The man Greenaway was one—a pest on the fellow. He sailed with him. Had you not contrived his rescue he would now be swinging in chains at Gallows Point. We have hanged five men on similar accounts—because they knew too much.’

‘You make no scruples about hanging an innocent man, then, should it be necessary?’

‘Not if our ends are to be served without danger to ourselves, you may be sure,’ said Sir Samuel coldly.

The judge sniggered. ‘Dead men tell no tales is Rochelle’s rule, and if ’tis sound for him ’tis sound for us,’ he said in his thin, reedy voice.

‘Ay, dead men tell no tales,’ murmured the Captain thoughtfully.

‘What is the value of the treasure you have brought in?’ asked Sir Samuel, his eyes sparkling with ill-concealed impatience.

‘What was the biggest treasure Rochelle ever brought ye?’ asked the Captain curiously.

‘Two hundred and twenty thousand pieces of eight—and a present extra for each of us.’

The Captain raised his eyebrows. ‘A goodly sum, forsooth. And he gave ye ten per cent. of that as your part of the bargain?’

‘ ’Twas money well spent—as you will learn if you play fair with us,’ remarked Sir Samuel. ‘Come now, why hang so long in stays? We are anxious to learn what you have brought us.’

‘What I have brought ye,’ repeated the Captain softly.

‘Ay, what you have brought us,’ muttered Sir Samuel impatiently.

‘Methinks ye will not be so glad when I tell ye what it is.’

‘What is it, then?’

‘Three ropes.’

There was an instant stiffening of bodies. The atmosphere became tense.

‘Why . . . three ropes?’ asked Sir Samuel in a curious high-pitched voice.

‘Because ye have said enough to hang yourselves, and it will need three ropes to hang the three worst villains who ever disgraced the king’s coat.’

‘Did ye bring one for Rochelle, while ye were at it?’ sneered Sir Samuel blusteringly, his little eyes flashing round the room for danger.

‘He has already got his,’ said the Captain calmly. ‘He was hanged while you were sitting here. You will see him swinging from my yard-arm as you pass out.’

The conspirators sprang to their feet, their faces ashen.

‘There is something more you should see before you go,’ went on the Captain imperturbably. ‘Nay, try not the door; your own marines will be waiting for you outside, an I mistake not.’

As the Captain spoke he crossed the room swiftly and flung back a curtain that had divided off the raised part of the cabin, near the poop lights. Standing side by side were Sir Alexander Frisby, Captain Parsons, and Lieutenant Markham.

Sir Samuel Menzies' whole body twitched convulsively; his face turned livid and his lower jaw fell loosely, while his eyes bulged as they stared . . . and stared . . . and stared.

The Governor's face was grim as he lifted a quivering finger towards the culprits. 'Arrest those men,' he said crisply.

There is little more to tell. The Captain's promise had been no idle threat, for Butcher Rochelle was hanged at the *Rose's* yard-arm whilst the conspirators were with him in the cabin. His trial had taken place, and the Governor had passed sentence, while the *Rose* was on her way to Port Royal.

The three arch-conspirators were tried on charges of high treason and murder in the very court-house where the Captain had been tried not very long before. They were all three sentenced to death on both counts. Since, however, they could only be hanged once, one-half of the punishment was deemed to be sufficient, and in due course their bodies swung in chains at Gallows Point with him who in life had been named the Butcher.

Nicholas Archer, as we have seen, was killed by a cannon-ball at Chagraw Creek, while Pallanca, it was learned from some of the pirates who were later rounded up, had been pistoled by Rochelle during an argument up the river. Thus did the whole nefarious gang meet the fate it so richly deserved.

Since this left vacancies in the administrative staff of the island, and there were few to fill them, the Governor was perhaps relieved to find a new acting Governor in Colonel Lawson, an appointment that was received with relief and joy by the honest population of the island. The Captain and Mark were offered commissions on His Majesty's ships, but they declined with thanks, since they preferred to go their own way on the sea.

Colonel Lawson expressed his gratitude to the Captain by making him a present of the *Rose*, in which, with Mark, and Dan as quartermaster, he became the scourge of the pirates who sailed those seas, and to whom he became known, after the tale of his exploits were spread abroad, not as Captain Champion of the *Rose*, but simply 'Champion of the Main.'

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

The illustrations by H. Gooderham (1900-1983) can not be used and are omitted from this ebook.

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[The end of *Champion of the Main* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]